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イラスト集付き限定特装版
やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。
My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.
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illustration ぽんかん⑧
GAGAGA

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やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。④
イラスト集付き限定特装版

渡 航

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小学館

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Book Report

Middle School Summer Vacation Assignment: Book Report

Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki

Class 2-3 Hikigaya Hachiman

Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro* is clearly a novel about loners.

At its core, this work is most certainly not about a love triangle. It is, first and foremost, a story about human mistrust, a story about an individual's isolation from the world, and a story about a truth that offers not a single shred of salvation.

Triggering a flag does not lead to a happy ending. Someone may understand you, but you cannot achieve true intimacy. Love and friendship cannot soothe loneliness.

There is nothing that can be done about feelings of alienation. Sōseki referred to it as *sabishisa* (loneliness of the heart), but we of this modern era have grown accustomed to this *sabishisa*. We have accepted it as a fact of life. Or perhaps one ought to call it the building block of the individual spirit.

Through this story, Sōseki showed how humans are lonely creatures at heart, and that they can only live their lives brooding over their rejection from society, never to be understood by others. Case in point: "I", "Sensei", "K" and "Sensei's wife". Each and every one of them is alienated. They trigger flags and win love, yet their thirst remains unquenched. Though they share a common place and time, they cannot share their *kokoro* (heart and mind).

A hundred years has passed since the Meiji period. Though that era is long gone, perhaps the fact that this story continues to be read today is proof in itself of humanity's core nature.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a quote from "Sensei":

There is no such thing as a stereotype bad man in this world. Under normal conditions, everybody is more or less good, or, at least, ordinary. But tempt them, and they may suddenly change. That is what is so frightening about men. One must always be on one's guard.

Don't trust anyone. Source: Natsume Sōseki.

Chapter 1: And That's How Hikigaya Hachiman Spends His Summer Vacation

"Y-yikes…" a voice groaned softly.

As if attempting to stifle that sound, the electric fan hummed and shook its head from side to side. Komachi was slowly shaking her head from side to side at the exact same speed.

"Onii-chan, this won't do. This won't do at all…" Gingerly, Komachi put the yellowed writing paper down on the table. "I knew you were one of *those* types, onii-chan, but this report just won't do… it won't doooo."

"Shuddup, you're the one who wanted to copy my report. Don't like it, don't look at it." I snatched the paper away from Komachi's hand, partly because I was upset she had rejected it so thoroughly and partly because I was embarrassed that someone was looking at something I wrote so long ago.

"Okay, okay, I said sorry. I'll just use the parts I can use, so let me see it," Komachi sang. "Well, it barely looks like I can use it, though," she added rather unnecessarily as she took the report from my hand once again and started copying down some notes.

This was that damned summer vacation homework in action for you.

Around in elementary school, it seemed you were given study booklets called "Summer Vacation Friends", but that wasn't the case from middle school onwards. In other words, you had no friends during your summer vacation. If I were to say it in a cool-sounding way, it would be *Friend/Zero*. There weren't many characters appearing in it, so that was good for the artistic design.

The middle school I had attended – and which Komachi was attending right now – did not give much homework: a worksheet for English and maths, the supplementary kanji workbook for Japanese and an independent research project, plus an essay or a book report.

As I peered at Komachi, whose hand had stopped moving as she groaned quietly, I chugged down some chilled MAX Coffee. The particular sweetness of condensed milk coiled around my throat and went straight to my head. That part of it could not be imitated by a café au lait. I also recommend putting shaved ice in it.

Even a mature person with mature tastes is partial to sweet things from time to time. The only coffee is MAX Coffee.

In my head, I decided on a stealth marketing pitch for this latest craze. Well, since I wasn't getting money out of it, it wasn't *actually* stealth marketing, though.

Spread out across the table was a mishmash of textbooks. The bad habit of spreading out all of one's textbooks at once, characteristic of a kid incapable of studying, was exhibited here in all of its glory.

I drew out a single paper that was buried in the swathe of all those textbooks and promptly read through it. "Ninth Grade Summer Vacation Assignment" was printed in block letters over the summer vacation homework assigned to Komachi. The content was, well, exactly what it said on the tin.

My eyes fell on one of the sentences inside. "Hey, it doesn't have to be a book report, so why not do a normal essay?"

“Huuuh?” Komachi looked up and then stood up from her chair halfway, peering at what was in my hand.

“Check this out. It says book report and also ‘an essay about tax’.”

Very often, kids who weren’t good at book reports weren’t inclined to read the book in the first place. A kid who was bad at reading would inevitably be bad at writing too. Komachi had to be one of those types. She didn’t normally read books, and she didn’t do nearly enough writing besides texting.

For a kid like that, a normal essay that didn’t require any pre-reading probably presented less of a hurdle.

“Ahaaaa,” Komachi laughed nervously. “I don’t know a thing about taxes…”

“Hold that thought. I remember writing about it in middle school,” I said as I fished around the cardboard box on the table.

This box was, to put it simply, my box of memories. It contained all my old essays, albums and research projects that my mother had thrown together in one spot. Komachi had said she wanted to rip off my book report, so here it was.

I found something that resembled what I was looking for through my rummaging. “Is this it?”

“Show me, show me!” Komachi sprang at me with a jump, coiling herself around my arm. And just like that, she prised the writing paper from me.

–

On the Subject of Tax

Grade 9, Class 2
Hikigaya Hachiman

The progressive taxation system is evil.

However much one earns, large amounts of it are swiped away as tax without equal compensation. The more one earns, the more the fruits of one’s labour are taken away as tax, and in return you obtain nothing at all.

In other words, to work is to lose.

If progressive tax is intended to equalise happiness, then I cannot help but call it foolish. There is no such thing as equal happiness in the first place. Conceiving human happiness in terms of money is inherently shallow and lacking in human understanding. The merits of implementing a “riajuu progressive taxation system” that taxes people based on their amount of friends and lovers ought to be considered from this day forth.

–

As soon as Komachi read the first part, she folded the writing paper into a tiny piece. Then she let out a short sigh. “I’ll write a book report…” she muttered with a sheepish look on her face.

“I-I see… I’m kinda sorry.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry…”

The electric fan rattled as it vibrated, letting out a low hum like an engine.

The crickets started chirping, as if suddenly remembering their own existence.

“W-well, how about this, then?” I spoke up finally. “I’ll help you out with your research project. Okay?”

“Okay, but I’m not holding my breath for anything spectacular,” Komachi said as she turned to her notes once again.

There was no point to homework or assignments in the first place if you didn’t do them yourself, but I wasn’t helping Komachi out like this just because she was cute. If that was the only reason, I’d have no choice but to help her out with the book report as well.

She sighed. “You gotta make me finish this properly. I even have to sit my entrance exams… I won’t have time for the mock exams right after vacation!”

“That’s ‘cos things normally pile up.”

“Yeah, haven’t I been doing a good job piling them up myself?”

“So piling up unread books is like a stacking game now, huh…”

If this was Tetris, she would already have Game Over by now.

That was Komachi for you, and yet here she was, right on the verge of taking her high school entrance exams.

“Are you serious about wanting to take the exam for my high school? Just asking.”

This should really go without saying, but my sister is a moron – a magnificent and spectacular moron.

“I’m serious, I swear. I wouldn’t copy your essay if I wasn’t, onii-chan,” Komachi answered with total and utter seriousness. Not that I really give a crap, but this really wasn’t the attitude you take when you mooch off the help of others.

Whatever, if she had decided on her own what she wanted to do, it was fine. The problem lay in Komachi’s grades.

“But man, you really set your sights too high,” I remarked. “Your class rank is sitting around 100.”

“Yeah, but I wanna go to the same school as you, onii-chan.”

My jaw dropped involuntarily. For a single, unguarded moment, this sister of mine, who normally treated me without an ounce of respect, showed a glimpse of her warm love for me. The corner of my eyes turned hot and a single drop threatened to fall from the heavens.

“If I go to the same school as you and say I’m your little sister, I’ll look like a super nice girl in comparison to you! Since you were scum in everyone’s eyes, they assumed I was super sweet after I enrolled in middle school! I was treated like an angel! I’m a total angel!”

It was hard to find a worse reason than hers for enrolling.

“…oh, I see.”

What angel was she talking about? She was the devil’s crush, I swear. Komachi was a total demon.

“Well, whatever. You can only do it if you try.”

“Yep. I’ll do my best,” Komachi responded as she started moving her mechanical pencil once again.

It was a book report, so why she started writing things down on paper straight away was a mystery. Read the damn book first. Was she one of *those* types? The ones that smugly declare, “It was shit so I quit before the OP came on” or “It was crap so I quit during the first half of the episode” whenever a new anime starts?

I turned to the bookshelf and searched for *Kokoro.* If I recalled correctly, a famous manga artist drew the front cover when the new edition came out, which was why I bought it. Since all it takes for sales to go well is a change of cover, about ninety per cent of what caught my eye was light novels, to be honest. Well, not that Sōseki was a light novel author, though.

I let my fingers slide across the row of book spines. At that point, my eyes fell on a book called *Science is Magic ~Become the Life of the Party from Today~.* It was quite an old book that dated from my father’s younger days languishing as a low-tier salaryman.

There is no living being that leads a constrained life, to the extent that you might say every person inserted into a hierarchical society is a free soul. I’m sure my father must have prepared hard in advance in case someone spoke to him at the year-end party: “Oi, Hikigaya. Tell us an interesting story” or “Do a magic trick, do a magic trick.” In my case, I had no need to worry about any of that: I was never invited in the first place, and even if I was invited I would never really talk so I’d never get called over a second time. What was a year-end party supposed to be about anyway? They didn’t have to forget about that so easily. And they didn’t have to forget about me either, please. (*Please?!)*

Anyway, since it was starting to look like I wanted to use the book for Komachi’s research project, I kissed it goodbye. Then I pulled out *Kokoro,* which was on the shelf below.

“Here, read this for now and then do the writing,” I said as I handed it over to her.

With a drawn-out groan, Komachi took the book reluctantly and started to read it. Once I made sure she was doing it properly, my eyes fell on the *Science is Magic blah blah* book from before.

When I tried skimming through it, the only party tricks in it were stuff like “*if you pierce a cigarette with a toothpick, the ashes won’t fall when you light it”* or “*if you dip a note into a glass full of booze and light it up, only the alcohol burns up, not the note”.* When you really think about it, you wouldn’t have any opportunities to use these party tricks even if you did remember them.

But the odd science references squeezed in here and there were oddly fascinating, and before I knew it I was reading it for real – the same thing that happens when you’re tidying up your room.

As soon as that realisation hit me, I could hear soft, rhythmic snores. When I glanced sharply in Komachi’s direction, her head was lolling, indicating that she had nodded off. Sure is tough to be a student with important exams.

I adjusted the strength of the electric fan and then gently placed the towel blanket that had been draped on the couch over Komachi’s shoulders.

Do your best, Komachi.

XXXX

July had already come to an end; outside, the cicadas were singing loudly in chorus.

I wondered if I ought to do the chores for a while to lessen Komachi’s workload. With that thought in mind, I went out to do the shopping. I figured I might as well look for useful publications for her research project while I was at it. *Newton* or *Science* or *MU* or something would be ideal.

Thanks to the heat, shimmering hot air was rising from the asphalt. In the early afternoon, the only sounds that could be heard in town were the chirping of cicadas and the revving of cars going by. I passed very few people in the street. It seemed as if the people who lived around here in the residential area wouldn't think of venturing outside at this hot time of day.

Crap, I would've been better off going out when the sun had set a little. It had been so long since I had last been out of the house, so the thought hadn't occurred to me.

My objective for this year's summer vacation was not to step one foot outside. Think about it: the reason why an extended summer break exists in the first place is because of the heat. This precondition cannot be ignored. Here's my proof: in Hokkaido where the winters are cold and even the summers are cool, summer vacation is extremely short while winter vacation is extended instead. Consequently, it can be proved that extended vacations are determined according to the weather conditions.

What this implies is that the purpose of summer vacation is to protect one's body from the heat, and if one is going by the original meaning, then going outside is not permissible. Hanging out during summer vacation is a legal grey zone, you know?

As an exemplary student who followed the rules and customs, I had been spending my time shut up indoors obediently. Oh, but don't call it a "Real-life Recluse" or anything. Actually, you can call it that if you want. I'm used to that brand of backbiting ever since middle school.

Even so, I would venture outside a tad if it was for my cute little sister's sake. I would do it out of a love I had been forced into.

When I went all the way to the front of the station, there were more people around, naturally. I waited a while at the bus stop, and then for ten whole minutes I was shaken around as the bus made its way to Kaihin-Makuhari. The nearby supermarket would have been fine for stuff like groceries, but if I was going to buy a book, the city's newly established urban centre with its slightly larger bookstores would be more convenient.

The neighbourhoods in Kaihin-Makuhari boasted a rather lively and bustling atmosphere during the summertime. The Summer Sonic Festival was held there, along with fireworks during the nighttime pro baseball games. The marine sports were huge as well since it was closest to the sea. The problem was that no matter how you spun it, I could only think crowds were annoying on a fundamental level.

When you enter the thick of one of those annoying crowds, you erase your presence. There's an explanation for why it's called "erasing".

By this, I mean that being entrapped by swarms of people is even more isolating than being alone. Basically, loners aren't just determined by the population density of their surroundings – there is a thing called the individual spirit as well. No matter how physically close you are to another person, you cannot be satiated if you cannot acknowledge your similarities.

The swathes of people who walked along with their friends and family – or alternatively, their lovers – did so painfully slowly. Was it because they were minding the side of the path the whole time? Maybe it was because they were so absorbed in conversation they stopped paying attention to their walking pace? Or perhaps they just wanted to stretch out their time with each other, even if it was just for a little longer?

Gah! Stop taking up so much of the footpath! Damn that trio over there! Were they one of *those* types? Doing the Flat Back Three strategy, were they? What a rock solid defense position.

Nimbly, I slipped past the trio's side, channeling the agility of a fantasista[1]. Right after that, four girls in high school uniforms cut me off at the pass, using a *catenaccio*-like defense position. But since they were laughing uproariously and playing with their phones as they talked, they dragged their steps. I overtook them without any difficulty either.

Shall I tell you what's lacking? Just this! Passion, elegance, diligence, sophistication, insight, dignity!

And the most important thing of all-

YOU'RE FAR TOO SLOW! [2]

Aaaaand that was the sort of crap I mumbled in my head as I outstripped those carefree, ambling city folk with rapid moves of my own. With the power of imagination, a loner who braves the elements with no friends or girlfriend by his side can turn the world into an amusement park at will. A guy walking on his own is pretty much thinking about these things all the time. It's quite entertaining, I tell you.

As I was immersed in image training that involved scraping onto life whilst entrapped in the eddy of war, I turned my feet towards the shopping area, which included Plena Makuhari, where the outlet stores and a bunch of different specialty stores were located.

As I was stumbling along, a fluorescent green jersey came into view. I'd seen that jersey before. It was the same one I normally wore for gym class.

That meant it was someone from the same high school as me, huh? *Better make sure I don't get spotted…* I figured, about to avert my gaze, but my eyeballs paid no heed to my thoughts and I ended up looking straight at the other person's body.

It was, to put it in a word, fate.

xxxx

He had neat, silky hair and white limbs that reflected the brilliant sunlight. As he adjusted the racquet case on his back, he let out a soft sigh that dissolved in the air, bringing forth a gust of wind.

It was Totsuka Saika. Instead of noticing me, he was quietly looking over his shoulder as if fixated on something behind him. Whoa now, was he an aloof beauty[3] ?

Indeed, I thought he was an illusion conjured up by the shimmering hot air rising from the asphalt.

In that moment, the crowd I had thought of as such a goddamn nuisance receded into the background. It was like Totsuka and I were the only two people in the world. Gripped by an onslaught of emotion, my jaw fell slack.

I was absolutely certain I would find him no matter where he went. That, I believed in with all my heart.

"Totsukuuuuh-" The utterance died in my throat. Instead, this weird sigh slipped out. The family surrounding me gave me odd looks from a distance and hurried away.

I gazed at Totsuka silently. That was because someone was running up to Totsuka, waving energetically behind him. The boy wore a matching jersey, and a racquet resembling Totsuka's was slung over his back.

---

[1] A fantasista is the Italian term for a playmaker in soccer. (Thanks to Nammyung for pointing this out!)

[2] This is one of Straight Cougar's lines from the anime series *s-CRY-ed.* I quoted the English dub.

[3] The Japanese refers to him as a 見返り美人 (lit. 'beauty looking back over her shoulder'), which is a reference to an enka song. Enka is a genre of Japanese pop music that is supposed to resemble traditional Japanese music.

When I saw how well they got along, I couldn't bring myself to call out to Totsuka. Hence the funny sigh that slipped out of me.

The other guy clapped his hands lightly together in front of Totsuka, probably because he had been late for their meet-up. In response, Totsuka shook his head casually. Even from a distance, I could clearly see his shy smile.

The two of them exchanged a few words and headed off towards the outlet store together. Once I had finishing watching them disappear into the distance, I starting walking off towards Plena Makuhari once again.

For a while, I moved my feet without thinking, almost like a robot.

…I see. So Totsuka had club activities. It made sense that he would have friends involved in the club too. Right. It was summer vacation, so of course he would have club activities. Was stopping by somewhere on the way home normal for him? It had to be. It stood to reason he would have friends among his tennis partners and that he would smile at them.

I wondered just when I started thinking that he was only chummy with me. In elementary school and middle school, the people who talked to me got along with everyone and had heaps of friends… even if I thought they were my friend, they wouldn't think the same, and even if they were my best friend, I wouldn't be their best friend – that sort of thing happened all the time.

Crap, I was trembling so much my legs were turning to jelly. I'd probably taste good if you added flavouring.

Somehow, I made it all the way to the escalator, where I collapsed against the handrail. Though I was in a daze, the escalator carried me up automatically.

I was on the way up when it happened. I discovered a familiar face on the escalator going down.

There was only one guy I knew who was idiotic enough to wear a coat in midsummer. At this point, I'd rather pretend I didn't know him.

The two guys with Zaimokuza were his so-called arcade comrades, with whom he was somehow having an intimate conversation with. Here is an extract from their conversation:

"Arcana Chance." (Translation: Want to play the "Arcana" game at the arcade?)

"Affirmative." (Translation: Sure.)

"Chance." (Translation: Same here.)

"Ace Chance." (Translation: How about we go to the "Ace" arcade?)

"Sacrifice." (Translation: Ace is far away so nope.)

"Exhausted Admiral." (Translation: I'm tired so that's a pain.)

"Trash." (Translation: You guys have no dedication.)

"Total Sacrifice." (Translation: Just let it go already.)

"Sacrifice Chance." (<- I have no idea what they're saying.)

I stopped paying attention to them. It seemed they were conversing in a language only they understood. I failed to see the point of talking only with key words. They were relying way too much on the ambiguities of the Japanese language.

It would suck for them if I ruined their fun, and plus I figured it would also suck for me if people thought I was friends with them, so I pretended not to notice Zaimokuza. But at the precise moment we passed each other, Zaimokuza's sharp eyes fell on me, and we briefly made eye contact.

"Oh?"

"…haaaaah."

The moment he uttered something, I wasted no time turning my face away and yawning at the sky. It's a roundabout way of saying, "I'm yawning right now so I didn't notice you." This technique of avoiding interaction is my specialty.

Of course, the escalators stopped for no one. With a jerk, the distance between Zaimokuza and I deepened, and just like that the scene faded to black.

The escalator carried me all the way to third floor, and as I drifted along with the stream of people, I made my way inside the bookstore. Without even looking around inside, I knew how the bookshelves were arranged. The comic books were to the right of the entrance and the light novels were placed in the thick of them. The area cut off from the aisle was dedicated to novels, and the shelf behind it was for literature. Heh, perfect.

…now where were the science books?

Since I didn't normally read those sorts of books, I couldn't find their location on my mental map. Well, I guess people only see what they're interested in, so they're not too aware of what goes on outside of that. There was no way I could ask the shop assistant about it, so I decided to look around the store for myself. You see, it wasn't like I didn't have the guts to talk to her or anything; I was just being kind by not bothering her about something so simple.

Since the store wasn't all that large, it didn't seem to take much time to walk from one corner to the other.

"…"

As I was walking around, I felt someone's gaze on me. Was this the Shoplifting G-Men, huh[4]?

I did nothing wrong! This slightly pervy book is for something else! A summer vacation research project! I don't believe in pervy things! When I swung around, preparing my excuse, my eyes met with someone I did not expect to see.

She wore a cardigan over her shoulders and leggings under her skirt, probably to protect herself against sunburn. She looked less stern than she did in her school uniform, but her small accessories like her wristwatch and handbag were woven very elegantly, preserving her neat and tidy appearance.

It was Yukinoshita Yukino. She was the leader of the Service Club, which I was a member of. She did live around here, if I recalled correctly. So this chick hung around the bookstore too, huh?

"…"

"…"

[4] A reference to the long-running Japanese drama G-Men '75, a detective series.

We stared at each other for about two seconds without saying a word. It was more than long enough to identify someone.

Yukinoshita surreptitiously returned the book she had been holding on the shelf and then briskly strode out the store.

Burn.

She ignored me spectacularly. Geez, this wasn't even ignoring – it was silent contempt. That was contempt comparable to the Potsdam Declaration just now. This was history in the making.

Even though we had made full eye contact and the distance between us was no more than one metre, she utterly ignored me. Whenever I got ignored by my classmates, they did it totally cutely. That's because I ignored me, too. Wow, that was plenty harsh as well.

…anyway, it was characteristic of Yukinoshita. I could say that much.

Smiling wryly in spite of myself, I circled the bookshelf Yukinoshita had been standing at just before. When I cast my eyes on it, it seemed to be a photo album corner. *So this chick's surprisingly girlish, looking at photo albums of her favourite actor or idol or something*, I thought as I skimmed the shelf quickly, but the one type of album jutting out was the cat album of all things. *Get a cat already.*

XXXX

I picked out a number of books in the bookstore at my leisure, and once I was done looking for useful books for the research project, I finished up with my own shopping. My shopping bag felt like it weighed a ton of bricks. I wondered if I'd overdone the shopping a tad because it was summer vacation and all.

Before summer vacation starts, you come up with four months' worth of grand plans in your head like reading all of Shiba Ryotaro's works, finishing off a game you were halfway through, getting a part-time job or embarking on a solo journey. But as soon as vacation starts, you're like *I'm good, there's still one month. No, no, two weeks is still enough time. Oh, I can still have fun with one week left… wait. Only three days left?* Time sure flies.

When I left the building, I was exposed to sunlight once again. Though the sun was starting to set, it was still stinking hot, and a sticky, lukewarm breeze was blowing through. It was the height of summer, but around here, where the earth was all dug up and a bunch of skyscrapers were lined up, the outburst of chirping crickets sounded far away. As I walked towards the bus stop, I adjusted my grip on the shopping bag because my hand was drenched in sweat.

Still, just buying all this was enough to ensure I could curl up with a book for a while. Being able to read a long series in one sitting is one of the great things about summer vacation. I recommend *Delfinia Senki*, *The Twelve Kingdoms* and *Seirei no Moribito*.

Mucking around with someone and making a big kerfuffle about it is not the true purpose of summer vacation. Whose bright idea was it to throw around "Summer = Beach/Pool/Barbeque/Summer Festival/Fireworks!" as if it's the correct interpretation?

Reading in a cool room by yourself; crying out, "This is the life!" when you're fresh out of the bath and scoffing down fruit and ice cream by yourself; staring at the Summer Triangle during the dead of the night by yourself; lighting a fire on the mosquito coil and looking at it with rapt attention by yourself; listening to the wind chimes and nodding off by yourself – these are wonderful summer memories.

Summer is best spent alone. Being alone is a good thing. It's hot, after all.

Today was another day the world went on spinning in spite of me.

I mean, I had a real feeling the world would keep spinning properly even if Hikigaya Hachiman did not exist. I remembered the quiet tranquility of it all.

An irreplaceable existence is a scary one. I mean, if you lose it, you can't get it back. Losing is impermissible as well. It is a point of no return.

And so, relatively speaking, I quite liked the relationships I was currently building, which couldn't even be called relationships. If something happened, I could cut things off lightly and no one would get hurt.

Without touching or stepping on any toes, I could deal with her-

"Ah, Hikki?"

The voice cut through the midsummer traffic. It was only really a murmur, but it reached my ears because I had been thinking about her.

Almost automatically, my body slipped to the side, making room for the two people passing me by, one of whom was Yuigahama Yui. Along with her usual dumpling ball hairstyle, she sported the quintessential summer look: a black camisole, a hand-knitted white cardigan, short shorts and gladiator sandals on her feet.

"Hey…" I greeted her lightly in return.

"Yup, it's been ages!" Yuigahama grinned from ear-to-ear.

She must have been hanging out with a friend because someone's face was visible right behind her. It was Miura Yumiko. She was from Class F, but she was also the Queen of Fiery Hell who existed right at the very top of Soubu High's school caste system. Pretty much all the guys were frightened out of their wits by her.

She was clad in an elegant mini one piece skirt that left her back bare, and the fairly expensive mules she wore on her heels scraped impatiently against the ground. Her eyes which peered at me were pitch black from mascara and eyeliner and eyeshadow, making her look like Orestes Destrade. What, did she have a day game today?

"Huh, it's Hikio."

She only got the first four letters right…

Although I couldn't help but feel she was making a serious fool out of me from the way she addressed me, that wasn't actually the case. More often than not, those boys and girls at the top of school caste don't bear any ill will towards people lower than them. You couldn't have any ill will when you had no interest in the first place. People are naturally indifferent towards things they don't care about.

"Yui, I'm gonna call Ebina now," Miura said, and without waiting for Yuigahama's reply, she took a few steps away from Yuigahama and into the shade. Since she had no interest in me, there was no reason for her to have anything to do with me.

That was the good thing about the popular kids whose lives were detached from yours. One's social standing is thoroughly linked to avoiding conflict. Many complications spring from class struggles. Conflict is born precisely because people who live in a different world are inserted into a single frame. If people were completely segregated, they would never meet in the first place.

Once Miura leaned against the wall and started talking on her phone, Yuigahama opened her mouth as if making sure of something. "I've been hanging around with Yumiko and some others today… what about you, Hikki?"

It took me a moment to respond. "Um, shopping?"

Gingerly, I brought out my shopping bag so I could stare at it. It had been such a long time since I had last talked with someone outside my family, so I couldn't muster up the words to complete the sentence.

"Oh, okay. Weren't you hanging out with someone?"

"Nope."

"Huh? Why? It's vacation."

Why, she asked? It was chilling how the 'vacation = hanging out' equation came to her so easily. Was she one of those girls with 'depressed if my schedule isn't full' syndrome? The words reeled off in my head, but they failed to reach my mouth.

"Vacation is for rest."

Somehow I managed to string four whole words together. All right, my conversational skills were slowly coming back to me. In my impatience, I tried to go for two sentences this time, but I had to catch myself from laughing giddily.

"…um, is something wrong?" Yuigahama asked somewhat worriedly.

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She was probably concerned about my inability to say anything coherent. *But wait!* If she was really that concerned about me, she ought to start by not asking the person in question whether something was wrong.

"Not really," I said.

Yuigahama's doubtful expression did not change.

…well, to be fair, my attitude might have been a little different from usual. I was on my guard against Yuigahama Yui right then. Now that we'd pressed the reset button on our relationship, perhaps it was right to say that I didn't know how to maintain the sense of distance between us.

Trying to recall our usual conversations, I chose to play things off as lightly as I could. "I get like that when it's hot," I said finally. "I mean, my jaw slackens and stuff. The train rails expand and, like, dogs totally expand too. You know about thermal expansion?"

"That's got nothing to do with dogs. Oh, but our dog is all stretched out and stuff."

"Then it *does* have something to do with dogs…" That reminded me of something. "What's the name of your dog again? Good at risky batting… Sab… Saburo?"

“It’s Sable!”

So it was Sable, huh? Oh, right, Saburo was a baseball player. He had come back to the Chiba Lotte Marines this year, so I expected good things from him.

Anyway, so dogs stretch themselves out a lot, I see. Not just their bodies but their tongues too. Also, Chiba-kun really overdoes it, sticking out his tongue all year long[5]. He ought to pull his tongue back in or it will dry out.

“Come to think of it, Hikki, why can’t you stand summer even though you were born in summer?” Yuigahama asked me.

I put my hand on my mouth. “How did you learn I was born in summer, I wonder?” I answered, slightly snobbishly. “Are you a stalker?”

“What’s that?! A Yukinon impression?! You kinda nailed it!” Yuigahama burst out laughing. But if Yukinoshita were here, we’d be dead.

But I nailed it, huh? The results of practicing in front of the mirror whenever I got in the bath were bearing fruit. Man, what have I been doing with my life?

“But seriously, how do you know that? It’s creepy.”

“Nah, you were using it as a pickup line when we went to karaoke the other day.”

“Y-you idiot! I wasn’t using any pickup lines! I wasn’t indirectly trying to tell Totsuka my birthday!”

“You were aiming for Sai-chan?!” Yuigahama cried in horror.

C’mon, who else was I gonna use a pickup line on?

“Well, in the first place, you know what it’s like when you’re born in summer. The only time your parents spoil you is when you’re just born, so I was brought up with air conditioning and never learned how to stand the heat. As a result, I have no resistance to it.”

“Aha. I see how it is.” For some reason, she nodded along brightly. It was troubling that she actually believed something I had so obviously pulled out of my arse. “So anyway, your birthday’s coming up soon, Hikki, so let’s hold a birthday party!”

“Nope. Rejected. Stop.”

“You shut me down so quick! And you did it three times!”

“I mean, look… generally speaking, it’s way too embarrassing for a girl to hold a birthday party for a guy who’s already in high school, so give it up.”

More than anything, I had no idea what sort of expression to show if something like that were to happen. Was I supposed to smile? Back in middle school, I had rehearsed a reaction of exaggerated shock, thinking that the others had been preparing a surprise party for me, but I had stopped altogether after realising there was no possibility of that happening.

“Ah, if you don’t want a party, then let’s all hang out together, okay?”

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[5] Chiba-kun is Chiba Prefecture’s mascot.

“Who do you mean by ‘all’?”

If I didn’t make things clear beforehand, I’d be in serious trouble. There was this one time soon after entering high school when I was invited to hang out with people way chattier than I was. I ended up knowing hardly anyone there. Plus, it was the very first event after the start of classes, so you were promptly served the loner course if you didn’t speak up, no side dishes allowed. In student life, “let’s all hang out together” was code for religious branding. First of all, you’re either invited or not, and if you’re actually part of the invited group, you get ranked according to your relationships with the others.

“Yukinon and Komachi-chan and Sai-chan, I guess?” Yuigahama suggested.

I see how it is. So Zaimokuza was filtered out, huh. Well, it was natural he would end up that way. I’d be the first to filter him out as well.

I didn’t answer for a few seconds.

Then Yuigahama said, “I-if you don’t like that, then… we can go together…”

She peered up at me, playing with her fingers as she did so. When I saw how she looked at me, my heartbeat quickened. My eyes darted to the side and I lifted my head. “It’s not like I’m totally against it. More like I’m all for it, especially the Totsuka part!”

“Just how much do you like Sai-chan?!”

“I-I don’t like him at all! I’m just kinda attracted to him!”

“That’s almost the same thing!” Yuigahama cried, burying her head in her hands.

Oh man… I lost focus and got swept up in Yuigahama’s pace. I’d been consciously trying to maintain distance between us to prevent misunderstandings, so this was quite worrying.

But hanging out with Totsuka somewhere was a great plan. Today I had looked at him directly yet found it impossible to call out to him. Geez! I have no balls! I’m a weakling! Scum!

“So what do you wanna do?” I asked.

“The fireworks display!” Yuigahama answered brightly. “Let’s go to the fireworks display!”

“I can see the marine fireworks from home. I don’t wanna go all the way outside.”

“How selfish!” She pointed her finger at me accusingly. Yuigahama let out a drawn-out groan, and then thought for a while. “Then how about a test of courage!”

“I’m scared of ghosts, so no.”

“That’s your reason?!”

I mean, the haunted locations in Chiba were no joke, relatively speaking… when I came across them on the internet at midnight I honestly couldn’t sleep. There’s Ojagaike or Tokyo Wan Kannon or Yahashira Cemetery. There are marks of an execution in front of a certain university and there’s a certain place where the radio signals got lost. Even if Totsuka wrapped his arms around me by some happy accident, there was a higher probability I’d be the one chickening out.

Even though I had rejected her, Yuigahama went on, undaunted. “Well okay then, how about the beach…? Or maybe the pool?”

"…er, uh, that's kinda, you know. It's too embarrassing, so let's not go there."

"Yeah… I'd be kinda embarrassed too…" Yuigahama shuddered and looked down, blushing. Oh come on, don't suggest it if it's embarrassing. It did make me feel less embarrassed, though.

"Nothing else?"

"I've got it! Camping!"

"There are bugs, so no way in hell. Just the bugs rule it out, honestly. Sorry."

"You're so picky! And you're a couch potato! I give up! You're a stupid idiot!" Yuigahama delved deep into her shallow vocabulary to tell me off. With a huff, she turned her back on me crossly and started stomping off.

"…you know, we don't have to do anything all summer-ish. Just something normal."

Yuigahama's feet ground to a halt. When she looked back over her shoulder, all her anger had been washed away, replaced by a faint trace of a smile.

"Ohh… I see. 'kay, I'll call you later."

"Uhh, that ended up being vague," I told her.

Yuigahama had already swung back around and was sprinting off towards Miura. Miura, who had an expression of extreme boredom on her face, looked far from pleased, but she seemed to cheer up immensely when Yuigahama clapped both hands together in an apology. She poked Yuigahama jokingly on the head, and then the two of them started walking off together.

Once I saw them go, I headed off for home.

The gigantic column of clouds stretching out overhead was turning dark red. A cool breeze started blowing. It was just the right thing to nurse my flushed face. I decided to walk home alongside the cool change brought by the evening wind.

The twilight was a mixture of indigo blue and dark red. It would still take some time before I could peer into what lay beyond, it seemed.

Chapter 2: Try as You Might, You Can Never Escape from Hiratsuka Shizuka

The cicadas were noisy right from the crack of dawn.

According to the TV I had left on in the background, today was going to be summer's biggest heat wave yet or something. Didn't those guys say that every day? This was like those super talented idols the likes of which are only seen once every decade, and yet, for some reason, pop up every year.

The heat was making me grouchy, so I switched off the TV abruptly. Then I collapsed on the sofa and turned on my handheld game. Today I resolved not to go outside but to slouch around the house all day. It seemed Komachi was holed up in her room studying, so I was alone in the living room.

It had been just under two weeks since summer vacation had started.

Every summer vacation, my lifestyle remains the same. I'd sleep till noon, watch *Pet Encyclopaedia* and *Summer Vacation Children's Anime Festival* and then suddenly remember to go out to the bookstore. In the afternoon, I'd read or play games and then study. I was quite fond of this way of living.

Summer vacation – it was a liberated zone for loners. It was no angel sanctuary[6].

You will not inconvenience anyone even if you laze around all day. Or so one would assume, but since I never had anything to do with people, I never really inconvenienced anyone to begin with. I was too much of a good kid.

Anyway, there was no one to tie me down during summer vacation. Indeed, I was free. In English, you would say FREEDOM. Gundam[7]. I – no – *we* are Gundam[8].

I didn't have to do anything anymore. It was quite splendid. I was content with my lot in life. Only, it isn't so great if your boss at work tells you, "You don't have to do anything anymore." That's harsh, so harsh that I quit.

Come to think of it, I haven't had any part time jobs for a while now.

Before I entered the Service Club I had part time jobs here and there… in most cases, I couldn't get close to anyone by the end of it all and I usually quit after about three months. It was annoying to go back to return the uniform, so I just mailed them a paycheck.

When I thought about it, the Service Club had sucked up a fair bit of my time. But there was no need to show my face there during the summer vacation. Mwahahahahaha!

As I laughed loudly, my cell phone beeped. I wondered if it was another email forwarded from Amazon. Or maybe it was sent from a warehouse in the city of Ichikawa in the Chiba prefecture. As those thoughts went through my head, I picked up the cell phone from the table.

When I looked at the screen, a single text was waiting in my inbox.

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[6] A reference to a shojo manga of the same name.

[7] The ZGMF-X10A Freedom Gundam appears in Gundam SEED.

[8] A reference to Setsuna F. Seiei's catchphrase in Gundam 00.

The sender was Hiratsuka-sensei.

I closed the message screen.

Heh, I've got it down… now I just had to respond late at night with "soooorry, my battery ran out" or "looks like I was out of range for a bit" or something and I was set. If you respond like that, the other person can't blame you for it. Source: me. Back in middle school, I mustered up the courage to text girls, only to get that response forty per cent of the time. Incidentally, I got no reply thirty per cent of the time, and the other thirty per cent consisted of texts from some foreigner called MAILER-DAEMON. It's not worth putting in the effort.

Once I'd gotten that over with, I went back to the sofa, feeling pretty good about myself.

I picked up my game (which had been in sleep mode) once again. It's nice how the latest handheld consoles have a sleep mode. You could really use your time smartly. The problem was when it was *too* spanking new, because a bunch of features I couldn't get my head around would inevitably follow. The communication feature was one thing, but stuff like the rear touch pad play left me scratching my head. I couldn't get my mind out of the gutter, either.

My cellphone beeped again.

What? What kind of burger's cheap today? I thought, reaching for my phone, only for it to start ringing for a ridiculously long time. Through some mystery, I was receiving a call. Judging from the amount of time that had passed since I had gotten that earlier text, it was probably from Hiratsuka-sensei.

I didn't know many people who would normally be elated over receiving a call from their teacher, and I was no exception. Plus, since I'd ignored her just before getting the call, there was a possibility she'd flay me for it if I answered now, so once again I decided to leave it alone. In the meantime, my phone suddenly fell silent, indicating that she had perhaps given up.

And in that short lull, a flood of texts had stormed my inbox.

What the-? This was creepy. Was she like this to her boyfriend or whatever? Dreading that another flood would storm my inbox, I looked at the texts with great trepidation.

I opened the text at the very top of the folder – in other words, the most recent one.

Sender: Hiratsuka Shizuka

Subject: "This is Hiratsuka Shizuka. Please contact me once you check this."

Body: "Hikigaya-kun, I would like you to contact me promptly about the Service Club's summer vacation activities. Please contact me ASAP. By any chance, are you still asleep? (Haha) I've texted and called you countless times just now. Are you actually reading this right now?

Hey, tell me you're reading this.

Pick up the phone[9]."

Holy shit! I almost pissed my pants!

I think I caught a glimpse of one reason why Hiratsuka-sensei couldn't get married. Damn, just how much did she like me? Creepy. Just creepy.

[9] This is a reference to a 2ch horror story about a stalker. The thread title was: "So I went to a love hotel with this weird girl".

When I scrolled up the messages, they were all pretty much the same. Basically, they said, "Participate in a volunteering activity over the vacation period."

No joke. This was one of those cases where feigning ignorance was necessary at all costs.

I switched my phone off without hesitation. At times like this, it's handy how loners don't get contacted by others!

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Komachi shuffled downstairs from her room, having finally regained consciousness. Judging from her appearance, she had evidently been spending that time drifting in and out of sleep, and the only thing she was wearing over her underwear was my hand-me-down T-shirt.

"Taking a break?" I asked.

"Yep, I've finished pretty much everything 'cept for the book report and the research project," she chirped.

"Good job. Want something to drink? Coffee or barley tea or MAX Coffee…?"

"So coffee and MAX Coffee are different things now… 'kay, I'll have barley tea."

MAX Coffee is not mere coffee. That is common sense. Café au lait and MAX Coffee are as different as night and day. As far as I'm concerned, the former is categorised as coffee, while MAX Coffee is categorised as condensed milk.

The anomaly of the coffee world – that's MAX Coffee for you. By the way, the anomaly of the light novel world is Gagaga Bunko[10].

I went to the kitchen, took out a nicely chilled barley tea bottle from the fridge and poured a cup for her. "Here."

"Cheers."

Komachi took the cup with both hands and chugged it down with relish. Letting out a deep sigh of satisfaction, she put the cup down.

"You know, onii-chan." Komachi suddenly turned serious. "I studied really, really hard."

"Sure, I guess. Not that you've finished yet."

She still had her book report and research project left. Also, when it comes to studying for the entrance exams, never ending is the ending – that is my Gold Experience Requiem[11].

Still, you *could* say she had worked hard to finish almost all her homework over the last couple of days.

"Since I worked so hard, I thought it'd be nice to give myself a reward."

"So you're a career woman?" At any rate, the words "give myself a reward" absolutely reeked of something a single woman would say. For a brief moment, Hiratsuka-sensei's face flickered in my mind.

"Anyway, I need a reward. That's why you have to go with me to Chiba, onii-chan."

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[10] Incidentally, that's the light novel label that publishes Oregairu.

[11] A JoJo's Bizarre Adventure meme. The reference is to Giorno Giovanna's Stand in Part 5 of the manga.

“I admire your logic. That was such a leap you could win a Birdman Rally,” I said.

Komachi huffed and pouted. Somehow, it didn’t seem she would take no for an answer.

“Okay, I get it. Is there something you want? If it’s too expensive, I’ll have to pass. I’ve only got 400 yen in my wallet.”

“Even if it was cheap, you’d have to pass…” Komachi muttered. “I don’t really want something that can be bought with money,” she insisted. “Just going out with my onii-chan is enough. Ah, my Komachi points are pretty high right now!”

“You’re so annoying…”

But it looked like she wasn’t really demanding anything physical. The point was that she suddenly felt like hanging out with me for fun. It’d be all well and good if she did that with a friend, but, well, I didn’t like the idea of someone trying to pick her up while she was in Chiba with other girls. Actually, there was a place near Chiba station that led to an entertainment district, otherwise known as “Pick-up Street”. A long time ago, there had been delinquents and thugs hanging around close by, and I hadn’t been near the place since.

Besides, if she were to do strange things with a boy for fun, I would have no choice but to bloody my hands. It would be best to tell Komachi as much.

“I don’t mind going, but change your clothes. If you go outside looking like that, I’d have to point a laser beam to stop the guys on the street ogling. Ah, are my Hachiman points high right now?”

“I dunno… that siscon act is honestly creepy. Plus, your methods are horrible.”

My dearest little sister shrunk back two whole steps.

…oh, really? I thought I had around 80,000 points or so. *For Hachiman’s eyes only* – I secretly locked her feedback in my heart. Komachi’s grading system was harsh, that’s why.

Siblings who live in Chiba have a high probability of being siscons. My little sister *was* this cute, so I had no choice[12]. People often say stuff like, “I have a little sister, but she’s not cute at all,” but you know how it is. They only say their sister isn’t cute because they’re related.

“I dunno what we’re doing in Chiba, but I don’t mind going there, I guess,” I said.

“Oooh, thanks. ‘kay, I’ll get ready, then. You should change into clothes that are easy to move around in too, onii-chan.”

Clothes that are easy to move around in. What, were we going boring or something? As in digging up stuff? That sounded close enough to bowling.

Still, when people say ‘clothes that are easy to move around in’, it’s easiest of all to move around naked, in my opinion. There were people like that in elementary school when we did the 50 metre race. They said, “I’m gonna get serious,” as they went around barefoot. And by people, I mean me.

Changing out of my T-shirt and into a pair of jeans, I lazed around picking out a shirt to wear on top. I was just putting on my shoes when Komachi started ravaging the house and turning it upside down.

What was up with her incessant loitering? She’d been doing it for a while now. Still, I have to admit she was like a tiny animal and her cuteness meter was through the roof.

[12] I guess now would be a good time to point out that the siblings in My Little Sister Can’t Be This Cute! are from Chiba.

As I was waiting around staring vacantly at the ceiling (one of my special skills), Komachi finished changing as well. Once again, she had changed in front of me like she normally did, but it seemed she had been completely ignoring me – that was *too much* like usual.

Finally, she posed in front of the dressing mirror with her hand on her chin. Yes, yes, she was cute and everything. Now could she hurry it up a little?

At long last, Komachi fitted a newsboy cap on her head and swung around to face me. "'kay, let's go!" she announced as she latched onto her baggage with both hands.

There were two bags. The contents were packed to the brim, so they seemed fairly heavy. When I wordlessly extended my hand, Komachi somewhat cheerfully handed one of them to me. *Don't get so happy.* She was one of those ditzy heroines that are all the rage these days.

I made sure the door was shut securely before we went out, and then we headed off for the station.

"C'mon, what's with all this baggage?" I asked Komachi, pointing at the bag I was holding as we walked along. "What am I carrying this for? Am I your personal chauffeur?"

In response, Komachi put her index finger against her mouth secretively. "It's-a-se-cret!" she sang, winking while she was at it.

"You're so annoying…"

"Heh, onii-chan. A secret makes a woman, woman."

"Are you quoting Sherry? I remember that from *Conan* [13]…"

This tended to happen among siblings when it came to manga – particularly manga bought and shared in elementary school. The trend was even more striking when it was a manga popular among both genders. Naturally, it was easy to get this sort of reference.

…well, when I was reading, she'd peep in on me, so my mum would see that and say stuff like, "Let Komachi read it." This one time when I was listening to my earphones, she said something like, "Let Komachi listen to it through one ear." What a buffoon. Did she think we were a lovey-dovey couple or something? Or maybe high school boys on the train on the way home. If Ebina-san saw that, she'd go nuts…

I steered Komachi, who was playing with her cell phone as she was walking, towards the side of the footpath, and then surveyed the silent street. The sun was blazing over the path all the way to the station. The trees by the roadside extended their leaves and branches over key parts of the street, while stray cats slept soundly under the shade. The smell of anti-mosquito incense from a garden somewhere drifted over to us, along with sounds of a TV program.

As Komachi and I walked side-by-side, a bunch of elementary schoolers riding mountain bikes passed us from the side. They seemed to be having a good time. For whatever reason, Komachi and I watched them pass before continuing down the path once again. My walking pace was a bit slower than usual, so I matched my speed with Komachi's until we reached the station.

We arrived at the station, and I was just about to make my way over to the ticket barrier when Komachi started tugging incessantly at my sleeve. "Onii-chan, this way! This way!"

"Huh? If we're going to Chiba, then the train…" I began, turning around.

[13] He's talking about the anime/manga series Detective Conan (or Case Closed).

In response, Komachi pulled on my arm and pointed. “Over there!” She ended up dragging me all the way to the bus rotary. An unknown minivan was parked in front of me.

In front of the driver’s door stood a dark figure. From that buxom body shape, I could see plainly that it was a woman. She was dressed in denim shorts and a tight black T-shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and on her feet she wore sneakers styled like mountain-climbing shoes. Her long, black hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she wore a khaki-coloured cap. Because she had sunglasses over her eyes, I had no way of peering into her expression. But when she faced me, the bottom of her lip twisted wryly.

I had a bad feeling about this.

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“Now then… let’s hear why you didn’t pick up my calls – Hikigaya Hachiman.”

The person who slid her sunglasses down and sent a sharp glare my way was – it went without saying – Hiratsuka-sensei. Whoa, was she livid…

“Uhh… our connection’s unstable. I think there’s some relationship between how much hair the company president has and how many antennas they have. It’s like Kitarou’s antenna hair[14]. It must seriously be a weakness that comes from the company’s name – it’s all SoftBank’s fault! Before they get *creative* about their publishing, they should get creative about their connection stability! Although I like reading their books[15]!”

“Onii-chan, you’ll get your connection cut… you’re being restrained by the name of justice…” Komachi regarded me anxiously and then stopped.

I was okay. I was quite a nice person.

…I was okay, right? Also, please return our connection.

Hiratsuka-sensei sighed. “Enough. I wasn’t expecting a decent excuse to begin with…”

Then don’t ask for one in the first place, please… or so I was about to say, but I couldn’t because Hiratsuka-sensei went on talking with a smile on her face.

“What? I’m just happy you didn’t get wrapped up in some accident. After what happened to you before, I was a little worried.”

I struggled for a moment to speak. “Sensei.”

By “what happened to you before”, she was no doubt referring to the traffic accident that one time. As a teacher, it was natural she’d know about an accident that happened to one of her students. What can I say…? She was quite a dedicated and good-hearted person.

“I pulled some strings and got in touch with your sister, so I could breathe easy.”

“…scary.”

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[14] Kitarou is an iconic manga character based on a Japanese folk tale. His hair serves as an antenna for detecting paranormal activity.

[15] SoftBank is a Japanese telecommunications and internet company, but they’re infamous for their bad connection security. SoftBank also has a subsidiary company known as SB Creative Corp., which publishes light novels under the label GA Bunko.

Her flood of texts and her way of confirming someone's safety were horrifying! It was almost identical to a stalker's MO! I now understood the horror of being loved. *I don't need you, baby*[16].

"So is something up? I'm going to Chiba with my sister now, so-" I said, prompting Hiratsuka-sensei to blink a few times in surprise.

"What, you still haven't read my texts? We're all going to Chiba as part of the Service Club activities."

"Huh?"

Was something like that in the texts I got? I opened them at first, but thanks to her yandere-ish texts, I switched off my phone out of fear. Figuring that I'd better have a look just in case, I took out my cell phone.

As I did so, a voice called out to me from behind.

"Hikki! You're late."

When I turned around, Yuigahama was holding a convenience store bag, which was chock-full to the brim. She wore a vivid pink sun visor, along with a short-sleeved T-shirt and short shorts that pretty much screamed "I have a wardrobe deficiency". It was an outfit that existed solely for the sake of summer. These days, not even elementary schoolers wore half-sleeved shirts and shorts.

Yukinoshita was standing in Yuigahama's shadow, as if hiding in it. She was wearing jeans for once to match her stand-up collar shirt. Although it didn't expose much skin, her neat and orderly appearance did evoke a sense of coolness.

"Huh? Why are you guys here?" I asked.

"Why, you ask? Club activities, of course," Yuigahama said nonchalantly. "I came after I asked Komachi-chan."

…oh boy, I more or less see the story now. You see, Hiratsuka-sensei tried luring me to do club activities, but after I ignored her repeatedly, she contacted Yuigahama, who felt compelled to contact Komachi in turn.

God damn it! I call foul play! They made use of my brotherly love – a love that compelled me to cheerfully go outside at my sister's beck and call! They really got me good!

But in this case, I suppose the biggest cheater of all was Komachi, who had brought me here without telling me the truth. The greatest hate springs from the greatest love. I'd be in deep trouble if I loved her any more than I did.

Speaking of Komachi, she launched into a cheerful and enthusiastic greeting as soon as she spotted the two girls. "Yui-san! Yahallo!"

"Yahallo, Komachi-chan!"

Was that greeting the latest trend or something? *Stop it. I'm losing brain cells here.*

"Yukino-san! Yahallo!"

"Ya…" Yukinoshita was about to respond in turn, but she seemed to catch herself just in time. "Good afternoon, Komachi-san."

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[16] In the Japanese, he says, "愛なんていらねえよ、夏" (lit. I don't need love, summer), which is a reference to a Japanese romantic drama. I changed this line to a lyric from the Kenny Rogers song "I don't need you".

Her face was turning bright red faster than you could blink.

Komachi gripped Yuigahama's hand very tightly. "I'm so happy you invited me too!"

"You should thank Yukinon," Yuigahama chirped. "I got a call from Yukinon too, but it looks like Sensei was the one who wanted to invite you, Komachi-chan."

Hmph. So in other words, the order went like this: Hiratsuka-sensei -> Yukinoshita -> Yuigahama -> Komachi -> Me.

When she heard that, Komachi leaped at Yukinoshita with a tackle hug. "So that's how it happened! Thank you ever so much! I love you, Yukino-san!" she declared with utter frankness.

Yukinoshita flinched for a moment at this open display of affection. She turned her face away from Komachi's and coughed primly.

"…er, that is… I was of the opinion that someone was necessary to keep an eye on that thing."

Yes, pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is 'that thing'.

"That's why my actions aren't particularly worth mentioning," Yukinoshita said after another pause. "You appreciated me precisely because that's how you normally are."

Yukinoshita blushed. When they saw that, Yuigahama and Komachi grinned adoringly at her.

Oh no, at this rate Komachi would fall under Yukinoshita's evil influence. It was already too late for Yuigahama, but I wanted Komachi to be on the right path. I had to correct her course!

"Komachi, you don't have to be grateful towards Yukinoshita. Since they judged it necessary for my own sister to watch over me, you should really be grateful to me for being worthless."

Heh, couldn't have said it any better. With that, there was no doubt my sister would show me the gratitude and respect and love a brother deserved.

"…"

"…"

"…"

Or so I thought. A drawn-out silence greeted me in response. Only the roar of the high-speed trains assailed my ears.

As everybody was lost for words, Yukinoshita smiled sweetly. I felt like it had been quite a long time since I had last seen her smile like that.

"Calling Komachi-san was the right decision after all. Good luck handling that thing."

"Honestly, I can't wait to offload him to someone else, though!"

I was being abandoned by my own little sister.

In an effort to distract myself from the tears threatening to gush out of me, I looked up. Ouch, the blazing sun stung a little.

I called out to Hiratsuka-sensei. "It's hot, so can we please get this over with?"

"Not so fast. The last person's coming now."

Right then, someone was descending the station steps and coming towards us. When I saw how he searched his surroundings like a lost puppy, I understood who it was in a flash.

Before I knew it, I was raising my hand.

That caused him to notice me and run in my direction. "Hachiman!" Even as he was panting, Totsuka reserved a bright, cheery smile for me.

He was more shining and brilliant than the midsummer sun. But he had smiled at people other than me… when I thought of that, my chest tightened in pain. Something got caught in my throat, becoming more and more agonising. The wounds in my heart were festering.

But when I looked at Totsuka's adorable smile, I was cured in two seconds. In English, you could say his SMILE was PRETTY and a CURE[17]. Totsuka was so kawaii. He was Totsukawaii for short.

Komachi, who had been standing beside me, sprang into movement. "Yahallo, Totsuka-san!" she greeted him.

"Oh. Yahallo!"

Damn, that was cute. We should make that the latest trend. "So you were invited too, Totsuka?"

"Yep, 'cos there weren't enough helpers. But… I wonder if I'm allowed to go?"

"Of course you are!" I declared.

Hang on, if we were just going to Chiba, that wasn't something to get so worried about.

Still, Hiratsuka-sensei had the good sense to invite Totsuka. *G'job.* And with that, everyone was here.

…everyone?

I looked around restlessly. "What about Zaimokuza?"

"…who's that?" Yukinoshita tilted her head in puzzlement.

In response, Hiratsuka let out a *hrmm,* as if remembering something. "I called him as well, but he said no, mentioning some fierce fight and a Comiket and a deadline or whatever," she explained.

Wow, seriously, Zaimokuza? The only thing I was envious of was that he had the choice to refuse. He was probably having the time of his life mucking around with his arcade comrades about now… even so, how did a wannabe author like him have a deadline coming up?

"Now then, let's get going," Hiratsuka-sensei said to us all.

[17] A reference to Smile Pretty Cure!, a magical girl anime.

We were poised to climb into the minivan. When we opened the door, there were seven seats: the driver's seat, the passenger seat, three seats in the back and two in the middle.

"Yukinon, let's snack on sweets."

"Aren't those meant to be eaten after we arrive?"

It seemed Yuigahama and Yukinoshita already planned to sit together.

Which meant that…

Oho. In other words, I would be sandwiched between Totsuka and Komachi – the Sword of Promised Victory[18]. *Victory is mine!* I was just about to climb triumphantly into the back seat when someone yanked me by the collar.

"Hikigaya, you're in the passenger seat," said Hiratsuka-sensei.

"Huh? Wait, why?!" I resisted as I was being dragged along.

Hiratsuka-sensei covered her bright red face with one hand. "D-don't get the wrong idea! I-it's not as if I want to sit next to you or anything!"

Ohh, how tsundere-ish. When you ignored her age, it was cute.

"It's only because the passenger seat has the highest death rate!" she went on.

"You're the worst!" I struggled in an attempt to escape from Hiratsuka-sensei's arms.

Hiratsuka-sensei suddenly flashed a smile. "I'm joking," she insisted. "It's a long drive and I'd rather not get bored during it, you know? Just talking with you is fun."

"I see…"

When she smiled at me so calmly and gently, I lost all capacity to resist. When I sat down on the passenger seat obediently, Hiratsuka-sensei nodded in satisfaction.

Once we had confirmed that everyone was inside the car, Sensei and I tightened our seatbelts. Then Hiratsuka-sensei turned on the ignition and stepped on the accelerator. The minivan started moving away from the familiar local station. If we were going to Chiba, then there was no time to waste getting out onto the National Route 14 from here.

But for some reason, the car Hiratsuka-sensei was driving was headed towards the interchange. The car navigator could only be pointed towards the highway.

"Um, aren't we going to Chiba…?" I asked.

Hiratsuka-sensei grinned. "Let me ask *you* instead. Since when were you under the impression that we were going to Chiba Station…?"

"Er, it has nothing to do with impressions. Usually, when you say you're going to Chiba, you mean Chiba Station-"

"You expected Chiba Station? Too bad! It was Chiba Village!"

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[18] The Sword of Promised Victory is the Excalibur in the Type Moon franchise.

“Why are you hyping it up so much…?”

People who aren’t so good at social interactions would still interact with others from time to time, but when it’s been such a long while, the anticipation would skyrocket for some reason. This was a textbook example of how looking back the next day made you fall into self-hatred, perhaps because of the passage of time. I hoped Hiratsuka-sensei wouldn’t fall into depression tomorrow.

But anyway, so we were going to Chiba Village, huh…? I’d heard of it before… I wondered what it was like.

Chapter 3: Hayama Hayato is Mindful of Everyone

The mountain ridge came sharply into view.

“Oh, wow,” I breathed. “It’s the mountains.”

“Indeed. It’s the mountains,” Yukinoshita and Hiratsuka-sensei replied as they nodded in unison.

For Chiba citizens dwelling in the vast and empty plains of Kantō, mountains were a rare sight. On bright and sunny days, you could see the outline of Mount Fuji along the coastline, but you didn’t really get the chance to see other mountains, particularly verdant green ranges like this.

As a result, just getting a square look at them made my anticipation rise quite a bit. Even Yukinoshita, who was usually unmoved by these sorts of things, let out a sigh of admiration.

And with that, silence fell within the car. Yukinoshita and I looked through the window at the unfolding scenery.

Yuigahama snored softly, her head resting on Yukinoshita’s shoulder. When I turned my head further, Komachi and Totsuka were sleeping in the back row as well. They’d been making a racket playing cards and Uno and stuff since the moment we had departed, but it seemed they’d gotten bored of that. As for me, I was stuck with Hiratsuka-sensei the whole time… why oh why did we have to introduce our top ten anime to each other?

Still, this sort of scene felt oddly nostalgic. It was like going back home on the bus after a school trip or an outdoor education camp. My classmates would be silent with exhaustion from all their merry making, but since I never had the chance to use up much energy, only my eyes would be fixed outside, forever alert.

The mountain range exerted its majesty, towering over the high walls along the highway. Beyond the darkness of the gaping tunnel shone a brilliant orange light. As I gazed at the scenery flowing through the window, a strong sense of déjà vu assailed me.

…I suddenly remembered.

“Oh, right… I came to Chiba Village for an outdoor ed camp back in middle school…”

“This is Chiba City’s recreation centre in the Gunma Prefecture, if I recall correctly,” Yukinoshita piped in.

“Oh, so you went to Chiba Village too?”

“Since I returned in my third year, I never participated in the outdoor camp. I know of the event’s existence thanks to the graduation album.”

“You returned? Where’d you go? Or more like why’d you come back?”

“I can sense your spite in the way you phrase your questions… not that I mind.” Yukinoshita turned around and looked out the window. I couldn’t catch a glimpse of her expression thanks to her fluttering black hair, buffeted by the wind coming through the slightly open window. “I went on exchange. Perhaps I failed to mention it before. My memory capacity is comparable to a floppy disk.”

“That’s not much capacity… don’t get near a magnet or something. You’ll forget everything.”

“Kids your age wouldn’t normally know about floppy disks…” Hiratsuka-sensei said, flabbergasted.

The slightly older types of PCs did use FD drives before they were phased out, though. “Nah, I think they were still around when I was born.”

“You’ve got a good memory. You have the memory strength of an MO,” Hiratsuka-sensei piped up, chuckling with amusement at her own wit.

But bringing up the MO as *the* example of high memory capacity really showed her age. “Nah, kids our age wouldn’t normally know about MOs…”

“I suppose I would know about MDs…” Yukinoshita interjected, sounding as disturbed as I did.

Hiratsuka-sensei blanched. “To think you don’t know about MOs… that’s the young generation for you…” she wailed pathetically.

Since I felt kind of sorry for her, I decided to back her up. I’m so nice. “There, there. Those MO things were used by businesses and stuff, so they didn’t really catch on with ordinary households. It’s not because you’re an old fogey or anything.”

“So you *do* know about them!”

Hiratsuka-sensei was drawing her fist to punch me! “Watch out! The steering wheel!”

“I hope I remember this when we get off…”

“Please don’t store it in your head with the memory strength of an MO.” I mean, MOs did blow FDs out of the water when it came to memory capacity.

Our van headed straight for Chiba Village like an arrow. It was just an ordinary day, but the road was teeming with cars. Occasionally, short traffic jams sprang up, spanning a kilometre at a time.

“The road’s surprisingly busy,” I remarked.

“That’s because there are plenty of campsites around here. They even have hot springs. I thought it was a custom for middle schoolers from Chiba City to walk around the Sarugakyo Onsen area.”

“Wow, I had no idea it was such an established icon…”

“I see… it must be because it’s a place of bad memories for you, Hikigaya… it’s understandable that you’d forget.”

“Please don’t taint people’s memories. The way I see it, school trip-like events are a great opportunity.”

“You sound like a festival junkie. I guess plenty of students do brighten up suddenly during those sorts of events.”

“Er, no… I meant spending the time without obstructive thoughts is a great opportunity…” If you examined my graduation album closely, you’d be surprised by how dead my face looked. Perhaps my classmates were more surprised – that such a person even existed.

“This’ll be like an outdoor ed camp, so the plan is to stay three days and two nights. Will you be okay?”

“Three days and two nights? What, we’re staying the night? I didn’t bring anything!”

“You’ll be fine. It seems Komachi-san did the packing,” Yukinoshita said to me.

I just realised something. Oh, so *that* was what those bags were for. The reason there were two of them was because one was for me and the other was for Komachi.

“Your sister is unbelievably good at getting things done,” Hiratsuka-sensei said admiringly.

“I know, right? My sister is my pride and soul. She’s got the Big Three: cuteness, prettiness and good looks.”

“That’s essentially one thing…” Yukinoshita interjected. Her words were mind-blowing.

Now that we’d slowed down and left the lower town, we delved even further into the mountain road. The minivan ran up the narrowing path without a hitch.

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When I got out of the car, I caught a whiff of thick grass. It felt as if there was a lot of room to breathe for some reason. I wondered if verdant green forests made you feel that way.

Somewhere slightly out in the open, a handful of buses stood motionless. This was Chiba Village’s car park. Hiratsuka-sensei parked her car there.

“Mm! This feels nice!” Yuigahama stepped out of the car and stretched with all her might.

“If all you do is sleep and use someone as a pillow, I suppose it must feel nice,” Yukinoshita said tartly.

Yuigahama whimpered. “I-I’m sorry! Honest!” she apologised, clapping her hands together.

“Whoa… we’re really in the mountains.” Totsuka admired the scenery belatedly.

Marvelling the mountains is a natural consequence of living in a flat area – that’s a Chiba citizen for you. Even while Komachi said, “I only just came here last year!”, she seemed to be having the time of her life, judging from how deeply she inhaled.

I might not be Yuigahama, but I did have to admit that the cool wind from the plateau and the pleasant sunlight filtering through the trees felt pretty nice indeed. Like the others, I looked forward to be being cut off from human contact for the foreseeable future. Maybe I could mail order my shopping and stuff.

“Hmph, the air is strange,” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she started inhaling from her cigarette. I wondered how she could even taste the air like that. “We’ll move out from here. Take out your bags,” she said, letting out a long sigh that honestly did sound satisfied.

As we retrieved our baggage from the car as instructed, another minivan arrived. I sighed. To my surprise, it seemed ordinary visitors came here as well, which made sense considering the campsites and stuff in the vicinity. Since it was a public facility, it didn’t cost much to use, so it might be an unexpected hidden gem.

Four people exited the car: two boys and two girls.

Indeed, they carried the scent of ripe fruits and cheesy love dramas. These sorts of people would probably have a barbeque on the sandbanks of a river or something and call the leftovers “rescue”[19].

[19] This is a pun. The Japanese words for ‘barbeque’ and ‘rescue’ are spelt similarly.

Just as I was thinking those types would probably go mountain-climbing in casual clothes as if they were having a picnic, only to get stranded and so on, one of the members of the group raised his hand casually in my direction.

“Hi there, Hikitani-kun.”

“…Hayama?”

I was surprised – Hayama was part of that group. Actually, Hayama wasn’t the only one I recognised. When I looked closely, Hayama’s group had assembled: Miura, the ditzy blonde Tobe and the hardcore fujoshi Ebina-san.

…huh? Where was the virgin fence-sitter Ooka?

“What are you here for…? A barbeque?” I asked. “In that case, I recommend the sandbanks as a good spot.”

“Nah, we’re not having a barbeque. If we were just having a barbeque, my parents wouldn’t drive us all the way up here.” Hayama smiled wryly.

So I was wrong, huh. *Then I recommend you go mountain-climbing in casual clothes,* I thought, when suddenly Hiratsuka-sensei crushed her cigarette against the grass. “Hmph. Looks like everyone’s here.”

By ‘everyone’, did she mean that Hayama and the others had been included from the start?

“Now then, you guys know why I invited you here?” she asked us.

We exchanged glances.

“You’re asking us to stay over and perform volunteering activities,” Yukinoshita said.

Totsuka nodded at her words. “Yep, we’re helping out, I guess.”

Beside them, Yuigahama cocked her head in puzzlement. “Huh? It’s not a training camp?”

“I heard it was a camp,” Komachi said uncertainly.

“I never heard anything in the first place…” I said.

Hey, which one was the right answer? These guys would suck balls at Chinese Whispers.

Hayama smiled. “I heard we were getting unofficial extra credit for this…” he said with a strained laugh.

“Huh. I just came ‘cos I heard, like, there’d be a camp, y’know?” Miura played with her curls.

“I know, right? But man, it sucks if that’s the only reason.” Tobe scratched the back of his neck.

“When I heard that Hayama-kun and Tobe-kun were camping together, I hrnnngged.”

Only Ebina-san had a weird reason. Also, what was she even saying at the end there?

Hiratsuka-sensei face-palmed and sighed. “Geez. Well, at least you got the gist of it. I’m having you do volunteering activities for a while.”

“Um, what would that entail…?” I asked.

“For whatever reason, the principal instructed me to direct the Service Club’s regional activities… and so I brought you here. You guys will be working as a support staff for the elementary kids in their outdoor education camp. You’ll be Chiba Village personnel, teachers on standby and you’ll support the children. To put it simply, you’ll be doing the odd jobs.” She paused. “More to the point, you’re slaves.”

I wanted to go home… she might as well have called this a sweatshop. I mean, sweatshops make you sweat, after all.

“This counts as a training camp for the Service Club, and I’m more than willing to give you extra credits for your work as Hayama mentioned. You’ll also have some time for yourselves.”

Aha, I see how it is. Everyone could understand when it was laid out for us like that. We had only heard about the things we were personally interested in, that’s all.

“Now then, let’s get going. You’re on duty as soon as you put your bags in the main building,” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she led the way. We all started walking in suit behind her.

I might say that, but we weren’t a particularly close-knit group. Yukinoshita and I walked right behind Hiratsuka-sensei, while Komachi and Totsuka trailed behind us. They were followed by Yuigahama, while Hayama’s group lagged even further behind. Since Yuigahama was right in the very centre, it somehow looked as if we formed a single group.

An asphalt path guided us from the car park to the main building. Along the way, Yukinoshita spoke up, a gloomy look on her face. “Excuse me… why are Hayama-kun and the others included in this, may I ask?”

“Hm?” Hiratsuka-sensei looked over her shoulder. “Oh, you’re asking me.”

“Well, who else would she speak politely to?” I asked. In this situation, I figured the only person who warranted such language was someone of Hiratsuka-sensei’s authority. But when I pointed that out, Yukinoshita flashed me a strangely sunny smile.

“Come now, that is not necessarily true. Even if you are not speaking to someone of a higher social standing than you, one can use polite language to evoke a sense of distance. Is that not so, Hikigaya-san?” she giggled.

“Why, that is indeed so, Yukinoshita-san,” I chuckled.

Hiratsuka-sensei interrupted our exchange of feigned laughter. “You guys never change. Right, you asked me the reason why I invited Hayama’s group. It looked like we were understaffed, so I put up a recruitment notice on the school bulletin board. You guys probably didn’t see it, though. Not that I honestly thought anyone would apply for something like that…”

“So why did you put up a recruitment notice then?”

“It’s a matter of formalities. If I just watched out for you guys, it wouldn’t be terribly interesting. So I went to those lengths for appearance’s sake. I mean, handling those good-looking popular students is not my strong suit. Looking at them makes my heart ache.”

More like those words made my heart ache. *Please! Someone please take her already!*

“But although that may be the case, I am a teacher. I must treat everyone as equally as possible.”

I sighed. “Must be tough being a teacher.”

If preferential treatment meant getting punched by my own teacher, I wanted none of it.

“You’re a teacher – no, it’s probably true for all adults. That kind of situation must come up often in workplaces,” I said.

I could see a shadow come over Hiratsuka-sensei’s face.

To serve an organisation also meant putting up with its bad side. Not to mention you had to be mindful of the distant future when you conducted yourself in a long-term contract. You had to work with assholes you didn’t like and see their faces every day. If you wanted to avoid that, your only choice was to become a stay-at-home husband or a NEET.

On top of being forced to work, did you really have to cop the burden of maintaining your relationships with other people? Do you get a relationship pay salary for the trouble? It’s weird how it doesn’t warrant additional fees, really. This only strengthened my resolve not to work.

As she looked over her shoulder at Yukinoshita and me, Hiratsuka-sensei smiled gently. “This is also a good chance for you. You ought to learn how to handle people from other communities.”

“Nope, not gonna happen. I can’t get along with those guys.”

“You’re mistaken, Hikigaya. There’s no need to get along with them. I said handle them. Learn not to antagonise or ignore them but to get through the experience intact in a casual, businesslike way. That is what it means to adapt to society.”

“Easier said than done.” If even ignoring them was off-limits, then I was a goner.

Silence.

Yukinoshita said nothing upon hearing those words. She made no reply or rebuttal – not even a murmur of agreement.

Hiratsuka-sensei smiled wryly at our attitude. “Well, you probably can’t do all that right away, so just keep it in mind for the future,” she said to us.

Once again, we walked along without saying anything.

Handling people, huh…

Perhaps it was not as difficult as it sounded. Getting along with others was a matter of emotions, but handling them was a matter of one’s own skill.

You’d bring up a topic, have a conversation with each other and respond to their answers with like sentiment. In the course of that process, you’d narrow the other person’s strike zone whilst indirectly telling them the range of your own defence. By doing that, you could handle them effectively.

Since I doubted my ability to initiate a smooth conversation, it would probably end up stilted before long. I might give a miscalculated response.

Still, you’d pick it up eventually if you practised it long enough, just like any skill.

After all, the act of handling people could only be described as an endless chain: you fool yourself, you fool the other person, the other person allows you to fool them, and you allow them to fool you. There was nothing to it. In the end, it was putting into practice the same thing boys and girls learn at school.

It was a necessary skill for those who belonged to an organisation or group, and the only thing that separated adults from students was the difference in scale.

In the end, it only amounted to falsehood and backstabbing.

xxxx

After we put our bags in the main building, we were directed to a place called the "Meeting Square". Almost a hundred elementary schoolers awaited us there.

They were all probably sixth graders, but they were a motley crowd with rather varying physiques. Had they been uniform-clad high school students or salarymen in suits, you could identify a unifying element no matter how many of them there were, so it wouldn't be a hassle. But when you had a ragtag bunch of elementary schoolers dressed in whatever colours they liked, the result was quite disorienting.

It didn't end there. Almost all of them were jabbering at the same time, and that, more than anything, amounted to downright chaos.

Girls squealing and boys yelling – the din was overwhelming.

Now that I was a high schooler, I barely ever saw groups of elementary schoolers at close range. Their sheer force (*that was a neat way of putting it*) took me by surprise. Was this place a freaking zoo?

To my left, Yuigahama was wincing in bewilderment, and to my right, Yukinoshita was turning slightly pale. Even though the teachers were standing directly behind the students, there was no indication that things were about to change. For my part, I just stared hard at my wristwatch.

The students must have also realised that something unusual was happening, because things started to quieten down after a couple of minutes or so.

Crickets chirped…

I could've sworn I saw some tumbleweed pass by…

"All right, kids. It took you all three minutes to stop talking."

Th-th-th-there it was! Those legendary words oft used before the speeches at school assemblies and class meetings. Egad, to think I'd hear them again at this ripe old age…

As I expected, the teacher kicked things off with a speech. To start with, they reinforced the usual procedures expected of the children at an outdoor ed camp. I remembered being forced to put up with this stuff in elementary school as well.

Once the speech was over and done with, the plans for the rest of the trip were presented.

Orienteering would be the opening event. You might also call it the walk rally. Everyone opened their *Outdoor Education Guidebook* and listened to the explanation. The covers of their guidebooks were drawn with anime-style illustrations. Ah, that art style had to be drawn by a girl. I bet the most artistic girl did it ("I-I don't mind drawing it or anything…" she said at the time), while the girl on the organising committee got the credit. One day in the distant future, that girl would only bitterly regret her dark past.

"Last, but not least, these are the nice boys and girls who will be helping you kids out. Let's give them a proper hello to start with. Pleased to meet you."

“Pleased to meet you,” they sang out of time with each other. It was a drawn-out greeting, much like the “Ita-da-ki-maaaaasu!” they were all meant to say during the school lunchtime.

It was like the graduation farewell. I’m talking about lines like, “This will forever remain in my heart” or “School trip!” I might have been forced to say that tripe too, but then again, I suppose traumatising memories really do forever remain in your heart.

The elementary schoolers’ inquisitive gazes turned on us all at once.

As if on cue, Hayama took a brisk step forward.

“We’ll be helping you all out for the next three days. Don’t be afraid to tell us anytime you need something. Let’s make this a summer camp to remember, okay? We look forward to spending time with you all.”

Everyone burst into applause. The elementary schoolgirls squealed and giggled over him. The teachers clapped silently as well.

Wow, Hayama sure was something. He seemed totally used to it. I could hardly believe anyone could improvise a proper greeting message for elementary schoolers without any preparation whatsoever.

Going by his specs alone, I doubted Yukinoshita could match him either. “You’re the leader of the Service Club, so aren’t you gonna greet them too?”

“I’m not particularly fond of standing in front of others.”

Not surprising, really. I mean, this chick would stand out in a crowd no matter what she did. She seemed to find something painful about that. Perhaps she didn’t enjoy the full brunt of the attention.

“I am rather fond of standing over others, however…”

Oh, right…

“Okay, let the orienteering begin!” called out the teachers.

The students fell into groups of five or six. Judging from how smoothly they sorted into groups, they must have decided on them beforehand. In all likelihood, they would be doing the activities in those groups for the duration of the camp.

I suppose not many grade schoolers associated group sorting with dark emotions. Every kid had the same bright expression on his or her face. They had yet to express the concept of the school caste in concrete terms. From middle school and beyond, those cruel demarcations would be etched in stone. Your time as a grade schooler was a happy bubble. *Man, elementary schoolers are great*[20] !

Our own group had somehow settled into a drawn-out silence. As he gazed at one of the groups of elementary schoolers, Tobe scratched his hair and opened his mouth.

“Man, those elementary schoolers are way young. We high schoolers are, like, old farts now.”

“Hey, Tobe, could you quit that? It’s like I’m some old hag.” Miura sent him a warning shot.

Tobe grew flustered. “Whoa, I totes wasn’t saying that! No sirree!”

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[20] He’s quoting Subaru’s infamous line in Ro-Kyu-Bu!, which became an Internet meme among Japanese fans. It doesn’t sound quite so sketchy in context, I swear.

For a moment there, I swore I could feel Hiratsuka-sensei's gaze on us, but maybe I just imagined it. If only that were the case.

"But you know, back when I was in elementary school, high schoolers looked really grown up to me," Totsuka said wistfully, having paid attention to the conversation ahead of him.

Hearing Totsuka, Komachi tapped her index finger against her chin and tilted her head. "High schoolers feel grown up from my perspective, y'know? Besides my brother."

"…hey. I'm totally an adult. I bitch and moan, tell filthy lies and make things unfair."

"Thinking like an emo doesn't count as grown up, onii-chan."

"Who knew your mental image of adults was so sad, Hikki?!"

Upon hearing Komachi and Yuigahama's scathing words, Totsuka patted my back lightly. "I might not be able to see how you are at home, but you seem grown up at school, Hachiman," he giggled. "You're really calm and composed, you know?"

"T-Totsuka…" I was on the brink of tears.

At that moment, I heard a cool voice mixed with scornful laughter.

"He only looks that way because he's not talking to anyone. In truth, he is a lonesome and miserable soul."

When I turned around, *she* was there. Yukinoshita had an icy smile on her face. I retaliated with a cold smile of my own.

"…how do you know my conduct in the classroom, I wonder? Are you a stalker? Are you aware of the laws against disturbing the peace? Do you wish to die socially?"

"You've gotten even better than before…" Yuigahama smiled with amazement.

Beside her came a crunching sound of someone treading on a dead branch.

"…are you perhaps… trying to imitate someone?"

It was supposed to be summer, but I swore I could see a howling blizzard behind Yukinoshita!

Her twitching smile was scaring the life out of me! *God, I'm so sorry!*

Hayama, who had been listening to our verbal spar from a distance, nodded a couple of times as if he had just come to an understanding of something.

"Ah, I get it. So that girl's Hikitani-kun's little sister, huh? I didn't think she resembled Totsuka," Hayama said as he stepped in front of Komachi.

Hey, don't get close to Komachi…

"I'm Hikitani-kun's classmate Hayama Hayato. Pleased to meet you, Komachi-chan."

"Um, hi. Nice to meet you too. Thanks for helping out my brother." Komachi recoiled in surprise and hid her face behind Yuigahama. From her vantage point, she looked Hayama up and down.

“Hayato-kun, there’s no way she could be Sai-chan’s little sister,” Yuigahama said. “She looks more like she’s related to Yukinon.”

That was only from the hair…

Hayama shook his head at Yuigahama’s words. “Nah, I know Yukinoshita-san doesn’t have a little sister.”

“Oh, is that ri… huh? Why do you know that, Hayato-kun?”

“Why, you ask…?” Hayama sent Yukinoshita a sideway glance.

Instead of meeting his gaze, Yukinoshita was looking squarely at the elementary schoolers. “I wonder what we’re supposed to do.”

“Ah, good question. I’ll call Hiratsuka-sensei over for a bit.” Hayama pulled away, having read the danger signs.

Yukinoshita was prickly towards Hayama in spite of herself. She was like that towards me as well, but she wielded her thorns like a sword in my case. Her prickliness towards Hayama felt more passive, as if she was attempting to shun him. I wondered if she had a riajuu allergy. I mean, I totally had a riajuu allergy too. I wondered if antihistamines would be effective.

Once Hayama made his retreat, Komachi sidled up closer to me. “Onii-chan, this is bad news!”

“What is?”

“If you compete against that pretty boy, your odds of winning are zero, onii-chan! All systems red!”

“Shuddup. Leave me alone.”

Did she come all this way just to report that to me, this moronic sister of mine? I never had the slightest inclination to fight with him over something anyway. As long as he had no flaws to exploit, I would not be doing this or that with Hayama.

But a surprise attack came at me from where I least expected it.

“This might indeed be bad news… you give off extreme *uke* vibes, not to mention I feel you’d be a tsundere *uke*, so if Hayama-kun ever came after you, you’d submit to him right away.”

“Er, right… I’ll watch out for that.”

When I thought about it, that was my first conversation with Ebina-san ever. I sincerely hope the second time doesn’t involve unspeakable things. What was this *uke* vibe she was going on about? I didn’t give off any damn vibes.

As all of this was going on, Hayama came back with Hiratsuka-sensei in tow. She explained to us the work we were supposed to be doing today.

“I trust you’ll get this job done during the orienteering. What you have to do is prepare lunch at the goal point. Set up the table with lunchboxes and drinks. I’ll bring them over in the car.”

“Can’t you give us a lift too?”

“We don’t have that much space. Hurry up and get going. And make sure you get there before the kids.”

We really would be in strife if we didn't reach the destination before the children, seeing as we were preparing lunches and all. Quite a number of students had already departed. Better make hay while the sun shines.

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Orienteering is a competitive sport that involves passing through established checkpoints and reaching the goal within a time limit. Indeed, it is a sport.

The original version of the sport, which involved sprinting around with a map and compass, seemed like relatively serious business. But on this occasion, the elementary schoolers were doing recreational orienteering, not the serious version. They walked around the mountain in small groups, answered quizzes at the checkpoints written on their maps, and competed for the best time and number of correct answers.

Looking back, I had memories of doing this as well. My group had struggled with the answers, no thanks to them being utter buffoons. I remember how I was the only one who knew the right answers and that nobody used the answers I whispered, so we ended up getting things wrong in the end and everyone was all like, "Aww…"

The plateau was cool even now during midsummer, and every time the wind blew, the leaves rustled in the air. Since we weren't participating or anything, we headed straight for the goal. As we looked around for the signs, we came across elementary schoolers sticking small papers on each other's foreheads in an attempt to solve a puzzle.

More than anything, they seemed to be having fun.

Every time Hayama and Miura spotted an elementary schooler, they called out "Good luck!" or "The goal's waiting!" or something. They were thoroughly playing the part of volunteers. When Hayama did that kind of thing, it honestly felt natural, but when Miura did it, it was kind of surprising.

"Hey, hey, Hayato. I really like kids way more than I thought. Aren't kids super cute?"

…so it was just the plain old "I'm cute because I'm squealing over something cute" appeal. I considered aiming for cuteness appeal myself, but since I was a guy, I'd just get labelled a lolicon for it, so I killed the thought.

When Hayama and Miura got into the habit of calling out to the kids, Tobe, Ebina-san, Totsuka and Yuigahama also started indirectly striking up conversations with them. What sociable young men and women. And to top it off, the kids instantly buddied up to them the moment they saw the display.

We bumped into such groups often, but it felt like we met the same kids two or three times. Since I wasn't looking too closely or making conversation, I didn't remember them very well. Seriously, it was hard to tell those elementary schoolers apart. They were all equally cheerful and noisy, and the only impression they left on me was that they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

When the road broke off to the side, we came across a group of five girls.

They were an especially cheerful, lively bunch. Being girls, they were fashion-conscious, and they chattered loudly in a girly sort of way. I got the feeling that when these types of girls went on to middle school, they'd probably become the socialites. They were the unhatched riajuu, so to speak.

It seemed that for these sorts of girls, high school students – particularly the flashy ones like Hayama and Miura – were objects of admiration. They needed no prompting to talk to us. The girls approached us with an almost man-to-man-like offense. Alas, no one came near Yukinoshita or me, as you'd expect.

When I listened to their conversation, they started things off with a greeting, before launching into a discussion about fashion and sports and middle school and whatnot. They carried on the conversation as they walked along with us, searching for the checkpoint as they did so.

"Fine, we'll help you out just for this one. But keep this a secret from the others, okay?" Hayama said, prompting the girls to respond eagerly.

Sharing a secret. I got a weird feeling this was also one of those techniques for getting along with others.

You could say those girls were just so cheerful and openhearted, but one thing bothered me. Most groups were either tightly knit or loosely connected into one group even as they were divided into subgroups, but I could see something irregular in this particular group.

It was a group of five, and only one of the girls was trailing two whole steps behind the others.

She had strong, slender and supple limbs and black hair tinged with violet streaks. Compared to the other girls, she gave off a somewhat mature impression. Her feminine clothes were also more refined than those around her. Frankly speaking, I'd say she was more than cute enough already. She was an eye-catching girl compared to the others.

Even so, nobody seemed to care very much that only she was trailing behind.

No, they did realise it, I was convinced. Every once in a while, I noticed the other four girls looking over their shoulders and stifling soft snickers amongst each other.

The one-meter distance between the girls showed no sign of closing. To the onlooker's eye, they came across as the same group, not as something unnatural. But in the film undetectable by the human eye, an invisible wall stood between them.

That girl carried a digital camera around her neck, and from time to time she closed her hands around it in deep contemplation. But she didn't seem particularly inclined to take photos.

A camera, huh? Digital cameras weren't mainstream yet back when I was in elementary school, so everyone used the disposable frames with the lens attached, like QuickSnap and its ilk. You had to buy one every time you went out. Since I didn't have many friends, I wouldn't snap many photos, which meant I would never use up the twenty-four shots. Most of my photos would show Komachi and our (then) pet dog. I'd take them when I got home from school for the sake of using up the film. The good thing about digital cameras is that the opposite is true. There's no quota for how many photos to take.

The girl walked in the corner of the very back of the group. She was looking in a different direction from the others. Just as Stand users were attracted to each other, loners were exceptionally skilled at detecting other loners, it seemed.

Silence reigned for a moment.

Yukinoshita let out a soft sigh. It looked like she'd also caught on to the abnormality.

Well, not like it was a bad thing, really. One ought to experience loneliness at least once or twice in life. No, you *have* to experience it. The idea of being chained to another person without reprieve is far more abnormal and disquieting. One has no choice but to learn about loneliness. I'm sure some things can't be experienced without it.

If there are things you learn with friends, there must also be things you learn without friends. They must be of equal worth, two sides of the same coin.

So this moment also brought something of value to this girl.

In my conviction, I pretended not to know anything. It was none of my business.

But, y'know, plenty of people out there don't think the same way.

"Did you find the checkpoint?" someone called out to the girl.

It was Hayama.

"…no," she replied with a troubled smile.

Hayama answered her with an easygoing smile. "I see. Then let's look for it together. What's your name?"

"Tsurumi Rumi," she said falteringly.

"I'm Hayama Hayato; pleased to meet you. You think it might be hidden over there?" Hayama said as he patted Rumi on the back and pointed the way.

…HAYAMA YOU DA BOMB!

"You see that?" I said. "He's smooth as hell. He just casually asked her name."

"I saw. It was a feat you'll never achieve in your life," Yukinoshita said, her voice thick with ridicule.

But then a harsh expression immediately came over her face.

"Although I wouldn't call it a particularly good way of doing things."

As Rumi followed Hayama, she ended up square in the middle of her group. But she didn't look too pleased. Just like before, her gaze was directed at no one, boring into the gap between the trees and the small rocks on the path instead.

Rumi wasn't the only one who didn't look too pleased.

The moment Rumi came in, tension flared within that otherwise lively group. Her presence did not spark revulsion, but to them she was the Other.

They didn't ignore her flagrantly. They didn't show their feelings openly by clicking their tongues, nor did they kick the ground in frustration. They showed no sign of blaming her for intruding.

But I could tell just from the atmosphere.

The enmity grew without any need for heated words. It was non-verbal, non-physical, passive aggression. It was oppression.

Yukinoshita let slip a resigned sigh. "No surprises there…"

"So that sort of thing happens in elementary school too," I said.

Yukinoshita sent me a sideway glance. "It's no different for elementary schoolers or high schoolers. We're all equally human, after all."

They might have let her inside their circle at first, but before you knew it, the group had ejected Rumi once again.

Not speaking to anyone and not being spoken to would naturally lead to exclusion.

From a distance, I could see Rumi stroking her camera unobtrusively once again.

According to the map, a sign was propped up around this point. If this many adults searched for it, we'd find it sooner rather than later. Sure enough, we spotted the slightly grimy sign stuck under the shadow of a tree. The sign itself had once been white, but after many long years of withstanding the elements, it was now brown as tea. A pure white sheet of paper was pinned to the sign.

All that was left was for the elementary schoolers to answer the quiz question written there.

“Thank you very, very much!” the girls thanked us cheerfully as we parted ways.

It seemed those elementary schoolers still had to look for the next checkpoint. We turned to face the goal point one step ahead of them.

When I looked back over my shoulder, Rumi was disappearing into the shadow of the trees, exactly one step behind all the others.

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Once we escaped the tree groves, we were out in the open. It seemed the goal point was positioned halfway up the mountain.

So this was the square, huh? Now we had to use our time preparing for the students to arrive.

“Man, you’re late. You’ll have to be quick. I want you to take these down and set up the table.” Hiratsuka-sensei got off the minivan. The orienteering course and the mountain roadway were probably connected from different directions.

When we opened up the trunk, we discovered a mountain of lunchboxes and beverages inside fold-in containers. The cool air leaking out from inside the car soothed our lightly sweating bodies.

The boys carried out the fold-in containers with a heave.

“Oh, and chill the pears for dessert,” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

We could hear the murmuring of the stream as the water trickled downward. It seemed the pears were submerged in running water by some means.

“Here are some kitchen knives, so I’ll leave the peeling and cutting to you.” Hiratsuka-sensei slapped a basket. Inside, a bunch of fruit knives were crammed into a mini chopping board, along with paper plates, toothpicks and a set for dividing the fruit.

Easier said than done. Peeling pears for an entire grade of children was quite a lot of work. And let’s not forget the lunchbox sorting and the preparations for setting the table.

“Seems like a good idea to divide the workload,” Hayama said as he gazed at the veritable mountain of work.

Miura examined her nails closely as she made her verbal contribution. “I’ll pass on the cooking.”

“I’m hopeless at cooking too, yo,” Tobe added.

“I’m fine either way,” Ebina joined in.

Hayama thought for a while. “Hmm, what to do? We don’t need that many people to set the table, so… right, the four of us will do it.”

“’kay, then we’ll do the pears,” Yuigahama replied.

The group split in two.

"…aren't you better off setting the table?" I asked Yuigahama as we went to the stream to collect the pears.

"Huh, why?" she asked at first. But then she said, "Oh, I get it. You want to say I'm bad at cooking! I'm perfectly capable of peeling pears, you know!"

"Nah, that's not what I meant at all." I just meant that since she got along with Miura and the others, maybe she should've gone with them or something. Whatever.

Once we carried the pears over and set up the different kitchen knives, we promptly went about doing our jobs. Totsuka, Komachi and I decided to line up the plates and pierce the pears with toothpicks, leaving the peeling to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita peeled the pears with consummate ease. Beside her, Yuigahama pretended to roll up her sleeves, brimming with confidence. Her only problem was that she was wearing a short-sleeved shirt to begin with.

"Heheh, I've improved my skills for the occasion."

"I see, then I look forward to it. Seeing your skills, I mean." Yukinoshita watched her, smiling gently… but the next instant, her face clouded over.

Yuigahama had peeled the pear into a sexy dynamite hourglass figure. The hell was this Buddha-like sculpture? Just how did it end up so lumpy…? Her anti-cooking skill was maxed…

"W-why?! I watched my mum when she was doing it!"

"You only watched her, huh…" Despair hung over the surroundings, but once she finished sighing, Yukinoshita picked up the knife and pear with resolve in her eyes. The pear skin came off seamlessly. "Yuigahama-san, hold the knife still and bring the pear around it."

"L-like this?"

"No. The blade must be level with the pear. If the angle enters too deep, the body of the pear will get whittled away." Yukinoshita paused for the briefest of moments. "You're slow. If you don't do it quickly, the heat in your hand will transfer to the pear and it will end up dripping."

"Are you my mother-in-law?! Holding a knife is scary, Yukinon!"

"Sorry to say it, but we don't have the time for this. Do your cooking class next time." I put my hand on the pear and gave it away to Komachi. "Komachi."

"Roger that." Taking the pear, Komachi began peeling the skin smoothly with the remaining fruit knife.

"Leave it to us," I said. "You do the toothpicks instead."

"Aww…"

Yuigahama did not look convinced, but she reluctantly conceded the knife to me.

Now that we'd swapped places, I didn't really want to show any weak spots either. *Do it more neatly than usual*, I told myself.

As the layers peeled off one by one ever so hesitantly like the clothes of an innocent maiden, the pear revealed itself as a juicy, ripe fruit. In my head, I was chanting, *Keep it classy! Keep it classy!*

Good, my arm didn't seem to be slowing. I wasn't a prospective stay-at-home husband just for show. I'd spare no effort so that I wouldn't have to work.

Totsuka was peering at my hands with sparkling eyes. "Hachiman, you're amazing. You're really good at this."

"Ugh! He's right!" Yuigahama groaned. "Hikki, you're *too* good at this… disgusting."

"What's with the 'ugh'…? Wait, I'm disgusting?" Inwardly, I was shocked.

"…I must admit you are quite skilled for a boy." Yukinoshita praised me, which was unusual for her.

Wait, wasn't this more like the first time ever? My face jerked towards her involuntarily.

"…however."

When I looked, the pears in front of Yukinoshita had formed into a group of rabbits.

"You still have much to learn."

Her victorious smile was blinding in its brilliance. She had done all those fancy-pants decorations in such a short time for the sole purpose of displaying the difference in our skill levels… she was way too competitive…

"Since the pears have hard skin, it's definitely easier to eat it skinned… I get it already. It's my loss."

"Oh my, what gave you the idea I was planning to compete with you?" What a thing for Yukinoshita to say after I went out of my way to acknowledge my defeat. She might claim otherwise, but her voice clearly sounded happy…

I was ever so slightly pissed off, but thanks to Yukinoshita's good mood, we got things done smoothly, so I left her alone.

Yukinoshita spoke up to Komachi beside her, perhaps because of the rising tension between us. "Komachi-san, you're taking your high school entrance exams this year, aren't you? Then I have a question for you. Which prefecture has the highest production rate for pears?"

"Yamanashi prefecture[21]!"

"Hey, quit guessing blindly when you're an idiot." Komachi's answer made me sad. "At least put some thought into it."

Was she really taking her exams this year? It seemed she had some proper studying to do when we got home.

Yukinoshita looked at Komachi with a pained smile on her face. "Well, you'd better learn it at some point. It's only a matter of days before your exam, after all… now then." She took a stab at arousing Yuigahama's interest. "Yuigahama-san, what is the correct answer?"

"Heh heh… Tottori prefecture!" Yuigahama answered full of confidence, having seemingly anticipated the question.

"Wrong," said Yukinoshita. "Redo middle school, please."

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[21] 'Nashi' is the Japanese word for pear.

“You shut me down even harder than Komachi-chan!”

That’s because she was a high schooler and Komachi was a middle schooler… it was wholly understandable that Yukinoshita would observe the difference. Still, Tottori was relatively close. It probably was number one a little over ten years ago. Now it was around third.

Upon hearing Yuigahama’s answer, Komachi suddenly let out a shaky laugh. “Heheheheh. I figured it out from the answer just now. If Tottori is wrong, then… by process of elimination, the right answer is Torine prefecture!”

“Incorrect. I don’t understand what you mean by process of elimination…”

“Well, they sound sorta similar. Tottori and Torine…”

Chiba citizens are weak on geography outside Kantō. And by geography, I mean they’re only interested in where Chiba ranks in Kantō. Tokyo and Kanagawa are the strongest two, while a fierce struggle ensues for third place against Saitama. It’s an uphill battle.

“Yukinoshita-san, what’s the answer?” Totsuka asked.

Yukinoshita presented the right answer. “It is Chiba prefecture.”

“Just what you’d expect from Yukipedia-san. Or should say Chibapedia-san now?”

“My original name isn’t even left there…” Yukinoshita said, disgusted.

How weird. I meant that as the highest praise.

“Ohhh, so Chiba’s first,” Totsuka said admiringly. “So Chiba’s pears are rather famous?”

Somehow, it seemed even people living in Chiba had a rather one-sided knowledge of Chiba.

“Maybe not in the city itself, but they are quite famous outside of it. I mean, they’re so famous you can get suspended from school if you pick the pears. By the way, I heard you’ll get expelled if you eat them.”

“That Chiba knowledge will most certainly not be on the exam…” It seemed not even the great Chibapedia-san knew that.

And so the deciding match for the Chiba Trivia Undisputed Championship went to me.

Thanks to how we chatted as we worked away, we finished the job smoothly. When I looked up, the elementary schoolers were arriving one after another.

For a while after that, we existed merely to dish out lunchboxes and pears to hungry children.

Chapter 4: Suddenly, Ebina Hina Enters Proselytisation Mode

When it comes to camping, curry readily springs to mind.

It's common sense that an aspiring stay-at-home husband would be able to make one or two varieties of curry. In fact, no matter what they try to make, it would end up as curry before they realised it. Actually, inserting curry sauce would turn anything into curry, so it is no exaggeration to say that all dishes contain curry ingredients. As far as Chiba's curry went, Sitar is a well-known restaurant, but in Chiba Village, you had to use outdoor cooking utensils, naturally. Also, did I mention that Sitar was really good?

It goes without saying that tonight's evening meal was a camp staple – curry.

To start things of, Hiratsuka-sensei was lighting the teachers' fire on coals, which would serve as a model for the elementary schoolers.

“For starters, I’ll show you a demonstration.” No sooner did she say that than she started stacking up the coal. She had placed a firelighter and some dishevelled newspaper clippings below that. The moment she ignited the fire, the newspaper clippings burst into flames.

Just as I thought she’d shift the flame to the coals and fan it awhile with a paper fan, she seemed to decide that was too tedious for her and suddenly splashed salad oil over the fire.

All of a sudden a pillar of fire soared. Please don’t try this at home; it’s honestly dangerous.

Cheers and shrieks and bored mumbles arose. Yet an unperturbed Hiratsuka-sensei pulled out a cigarette from somewhere and held it in her mouth, a nihilistic grin on her face. With the cigarette sticking out of her mouth, she brought her face close to the fire and inhaled deeply.

She moved her face away and let out a long, satisfied sigh. “That’s more or less how you do it.”

“You seem ridiculously used to this.” Her movements were quick and sharp, not to mention she had rushed to use the underhanded trick known as the salad oil.

With a somewhat faraway look in her eyes, Hiratsuka-sensei explained. “Heh, I used to do this all the time when I did the barbeques for my university club. While I was lighting the fire, the couples would get all touchy feely.” She scowled. “Now I’m in a bad mood.”

Hiratsuka-sensei recoiled from the fire as if it held bad memories for her.

“The boys will prepare the fires while the girls bring over the ingredients,” she said as walked away with the girls. Was some bitterness over her past slipping into her motive for splitting up the kids here? Was she all right?

Totsuka, Hayama, Tobe and I remained.

“Then shall we get the preparations done?”

Hayama and Tobe put on some cotton gloves and stacked the coal, while Totsuka prepared the firelighter and the newspaper.

…crap, I was off to a late start.

The preparations themselves progressed smoothly, and all that remained was the menial job of fanning the flames over and over.

I could hardly believe that in this situation I didn’t have the heart to sit around and do nothing. To be honest, I would have been fine with a “’kay, I’ll leave the rest to you” if it was just Hayama and Tobe, but I was afraid of what Totsuka might think of that, predictably enough.

Resignedly, I put on some cotton gloves, took the paper fan and ushered in the wind, the way they often did it with eels dipped and broiled in soy-based sauce. *Pata pata pata.*

“Looks hot…” Totsuka called out, sounding concerned for me.

“I guess…”

Plateaus are supposed to be cool, but it was still midsummer. Working right beside the fire caused the sweat to drip liberally off me.

“I’ll get some drinks for everyone,” Totsuka said as he left the place.

That prompted Tobe to follow him. “If you’re getting one for everyone, I’ll help out, yo.” Contrary to my expectations, he might be a nice guy. That or maybe it was chivalry, not wanting to make Totsuka carry heavy things with his slender arms. *Ahem. Go forth and complete this task in my stead.*

That just left me and Hayama.

“…”

Pata pata pata pata.

“…”

Pata pata pata pata.

I turned off my emotions and focused on nothing but fanning, free from obstructive thoughts. After a while, it became fun to watch the pitch black coals steadily become tinged with red.

Only, my eyes began to water from the heat in the fire and the sky. When I rubbed my eyes with my cotton gloves and lifted my face, my gaze met with Hayama’s. That meant that he had been looking at me. If Ebina we’re here, we’d be in trouble.

“…what?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Hayama said evasively.

Silence.

Without stopping my work, I glared in Hayama’s direction. That prompted Hayama to open his mouth and utter those slippery words again.

“Really, it’s nothing.”

It’s nothing, it’s nothing, he says. What was he – a broken record? I’ve never seen anyone who actually had nothing on their mind insist so much that it was nothing.

As I was performing the rather irritating action of glaring at Hayama every five seconds, Hayama shrugged and spoke up resignedly.

“…Hikitani-kun, about Yu-”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Hachiman.” Totsuka pressed a chilled paper cup against my cheek, interrupting Hayama’s words. My heart jumped at the cold sensation.

When I looked up, Totsuka had a pure, innocent smile on his face, happy that he’d successfully pulled off his prank. He was panting a little as if he’d hurried back. His flushed cheeks were so adorable. If you exchanged his cuteness for heavenliness, that would bolster his angelic qualities even further.

My heart was pounding heavily as it usually did in these situations. I fought to contain my alarm. Eventually, I came to my senses and mustered a quiet murmur.

“Oh, thank youuuu.”

Since I was shaking so much, the last part of my voice extended a little. Tobe, who had been clutching a bunch of clear plastic bottles behind Totsuka, heard that and grimaced somewhat.

"…I'll take over," Hayama suggested, flashing a smile.

Since he was so nice and all, I took him up on his offer to switch places. I passed him the fan and took off my cotton gloves before taking the barley tea from Totsuka. "'kay, I'll leave the rest to you." I paused. "So what were you talking about before?"

"I'll tell you later." Instead of being offended, Hayama smiled brightly and turned back to the fire. He started fanning. *Pata pata.*

Man, was I beat.

As I slurped my barley tea, I had my eyes on Hayama's crouched back. I wondered what Hayama was trying to say to me earlier. Well, I could think of about two things. Still, I couldn't figure out exactly what Hayama was about to ask.

I sat down on the sun-baked bench and drank my tea, resting like a stereotypical senior citizen.

That was when the girls returned.

Noticing how the preparations for the fire were thoroughly under control, Miura let out a shout of delight. "Hayama, you're the greatest!" she sang.

"Oh, you're right. Hayato-kun is the outdoors-type!" Ebina chimed in with great admiration.

Then, the sideway glances were on me. "Why's Hikitani-kun avoiding the work?" I sensed the unspoken question keenly.

"Hikitani-kun pretty much did all the work."

Wow, what a casual interjection. Hayama really was a nice guy.

The problem was that Hayama's interjection had produced a "Hayato's so nice, always sticking up for others… teehee," sort of vibe in the air.

Well, that's how the world works, I guess.

"Hikki, you worked hard. Here you go." Yuigahama, who had come back with Miura and the others, handed me a face-washing paper towel. There was no trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"Ah, Hachiman, you really did work hard! Really, you did," Totsuka insisted as he clenched his fists tightly against his chest. Come to think of it, it would only look like I was avoiding work if you had just walked in.

"I could totally tell. Hikki, you've got this weird serious look in your eyes." Yuigahama burst out laughing.

Behind her, Yukinoshita peered at my face. "Besides, you can tell by looking. Stop wiping your face with your gloves. It's unseemly," she said as if she had been watching me this whole time.

Ah, so I'd dirtied my face. Understanding now the purpose of Yuigahama's face-washing towel, I helped myself to it gratefully.

"…thanks."

Even as I uttered those words, I got the feeling they weren't aimed at any particular person.

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Komachi and Hiratsuka-sensei walked towards us, clutching boxes bulging with vegetables. The two of them seemed to be giggling over something greatly amusing. Somehow, I could guess what they were talking about.

In all likelihood – me. Since one of my main talents was excessive self-consciousness to the extent I generally assumed I was the butt end of the joke whenever I heard laughter in class, it was easy to make an assumption of that nature. Geez, popular people were harsh! …harsh, I say.

Now that I'd spent some time wondering what Hiratsuka-sensei was saying, I was pretty down in the dumps.

"What's up, Hikigaya? You seem gloomy. Book boys don't like the outdoors, I take it?"

"The hell's this book boy you're going on about…?" Yeah, I did like reading, but it's not like I gobbled up books or anything[22]. "Hey, Komachi, what were you talking about?"

"Huh? We were talking about all the stuff you've done for me. You're such a nice, super helpful onii-chan who helped me out and showed me his old essays for the sake of my book report. Ah, your service built up my Komachi points," she sang.

"Okay. I pretty much get it. It's 'cos I made you cry."

So it was that kind of point system, huh? And hang on, she must have been talking about the contents of my book reports and essays.

"Even though I said you were thoughtful, onii-chan, you just won't acknowledge it," Komachi grumbled in complaint.

Hiratsuka-sensei looked like she was just about to flick Komachi in the forehead, but stopped herself. "Well, something thereabouts. More than half of it was fond stories involving the two of you. We were asking each other about our childhood memories."

"Waaah! That's, like, foul play… that'll make my Komachi points go way down or something…" Komachi's face was turning beet red in front of my eyes.

She coughed loudly and affectedly to distract us from her reddening cheeks, before sending a sideway glance in my direction.

"J-just joking… d-did my reaction just now raise my Komachi points?"

"You're such a moron…"

My anger dissipated. She was just too disgustingly cute.

"Stop saying moronic things and make the curry already. Gotta cook the rice too."

If I hung out with her, we'd never get any eating done. I yanked Komachi's box from her and carried it all the way to the kitchen.

Although Komachi was spacing out for a while, she nodded eagerly at something behind me.

I might have called it a kitchen, but it consisted solely of an all-purpose sink. It was there for washing the rice and preparing meals.

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[22] A reference to the eponymous Book Girl from the *Bungaku Shojo* light novel series. The heroine Touka literally eats books.

There wasn't exactly much variety in the ingredients. I mean, my social life had more variety. Three slices of pork, carrots, onions and potatoes. It immediately brought to mind the curry rice served in the average Japanese house.

"Well, when you think about it, it's appropriate for sixth graders to cook rice outdoors." Even Yukinoshita blurted out the orthodox way of thinking.

It won't change you for the better, but it was a safe choice that didn't leave much gap for failure. "Yeah, I guess. In real houses, the curry you make shows something about your character. The curry your mother makes is full of stuff, like thick fried tofu and so on."

"Hmm, so that's how it is, huh."

Yukinoshita's answer was cold. I mean, she was always cold, but this time she only made some non-committal response, and somehow she seemed listless.

"Yup, that's how it is," I said. "Like noodles made from konnyaku and daikon. You whip things up in a pot."

"Yeah, yeah, like putting fish-paste cake in it and stuff, man." Tobe joined into the conversation suddenly.

"Uh, yeah." I was so startled I couldn't even muster a decent response.

Hey, don't talk to me so casually. I'll end up thinking we're friends, damn it.

But Tobe acted as if he didn't mind and muttered vague, incomprehensible things like, "fish-paste cake and seafood, man" under his breath. Maybe he actually was a nice guy if he was willing to have a conversation with me, of all people.

But, assuming he was a nice guy, I was wrong not to broaden the topic. Since there were way too many things wrong with me, I resolved not to talk to him again so that I wouldn't cause him any further trouble.

Beside me, Yuigahama was humming as she peeled the potato skins with a peeler. Since she wasn't using the kitchen knife, she must have tried it once and given up. "But we can make stuff like mama's curry, ya know. We just need to put some weird leaves in it and stuff. I mean, my mum was pretty ditzy and all."

She was the ditzy one. No mistaking it – it was hereditary. I'm begging you, please take out the sprout. You'll die of solanine.

"Ah, look. A leaf just like this," Yuigahama said as she hurriedly put down her peeler and reached over towards a twig, plucking a single leaf. *Yeah, it's a leaf! Whoopdee doo.* That was the kind of feeling the leaf gave off.

…ah, could it be this was one of those things they called a bay leaf? I'd been led to believe it was a relatively popular spice.

"Laurier is in that leaf, I believe…" Yukinoshita remarked.

"What? Loli?"

A random delusion popped up in my head.

"Eheheh… leaf got in the curry…" - Loli-san (age six)

I'd have to look it up on Pixiv when I got home… [23]

As I pondered that thought, Yukinoshita glared at me lightly. "I'll say this just in case, but laurier is a bay leaf. What do you think, Lolicon-san?"

I winced. Was Yukinoshita-san an esper?!

And wait, just who was Lolicon-san? I'm a siscon, you know…

"Come to think of it, I should know it too if it's a bay leaf."

So i herd u liek bayleefz[24].

But of course, Yuigahama didn't seem to know about it, evidenced from how she nudged me lightly. "Isn't laurier… a kind of tissue…?"

It wasn't hereditary. It was an evolution. A Warp Digivolution, if I may add[25].

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We had our individual duties, but we also finished the preparations for cooking and washing the rice. With that over and done with, we were thoroughly in charge of preparing our own servings.

I arranged the outdoor cooking utensils into a set and boiled the meat and vegetables in a pot. Throughout all this, Ebina-san was muttering, "Carrots look phallic… how lewd," although Miura kept knocking her on the head. As the only one to grace that statement with a comeback when no one else was willing, wasn't Miura honestly kind-hearted in her own way? But violent heroines weren't popular these days; the ones that went out of their way to ignore you were all the rage nowadays.

After putting water in the pot and boiling it, I picked out two types of curry sauce and put them in. The fat brought out the flavor of the three slices of meat, while the curry sauce made it spicy. Now to carefully boil it all together. As you'd expect from older students, along with the veteran cooks, things progressed quite smoothly.

While I looked around my surroundings, steam and smoke rose from pots here and there. It was the first outdoor cooking session for the elementary schoolers. I could also see quite a few of the groups were having a tough time with it.

"If you've got free time, you may as well look around and help them out, huh?" Hiratsuka-sensei said, her words tinged with an unspoken "not really my thing, though". Not my thing either.

Still, I had to wonder just why those riajuu liked networking so much. Weren't batteries and stuff also connected by networks?

"Well, you don't get many opportunities to talk to elementary schoolers," Hayama said, as if he'd gotten well on board with the suggestion.

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[23] Pixiv is a site many Japanese artists use to upload anime-esque drawings.

[24] In the Japanese, the reference is to a 2ch meme involving cute anime girls making derpy faces and explaining the obvious. I changed this to a variation of the English internet meme "so i herd u liek mudkipz". This makes extra sense because "Bayleef" is a Pokemon.

[25] In the popular kids' anime *Digimon,* a Warp Digivolution refers to when a Digimon reaches a higher level, directly bypassing any intermittent phases.

“But the pot’s boiling.”

“Yeah. That’s why you stick around in one spot.”

That’s not what I meant when I said that… for some reason he assumed I always agreed with him. When you think about it like a normal person, I was trying to say I wasn’t going because the pot was boiling, right? Right? That’s what I meant. Why did it sound like I had just tried giving him advice?

I decided on a hasty withdrawal for the moment. “I’ll keep watch on the pan…” I announced.

“Don’t sweat it, Hikigaya. I’ll keep watch for you.”

A grinning Hiratsuka-sensei stood in my way.

I see how it is. This was training “for my own good”, am I right?

Leading the way, Hayama dropped by the closest group for a visit. Not that I really cared, but this guy came across as the leader of the Service Club. Kind of.

The elementary schoolers gave us a warm reception, as if the appearance of high schoolers was quite an event for them. They explained what was so special about their curry, and even though they hadn’t finished it yet they were telling each other to eat their tucker like country grannies. Well, Japanese curry was all about being better than the baseline regardless of the maker. I didn’t think anything too bizarre would emerge.

Hayama and the others were surrounded by the elementary schoolers and everything was fine and dandy. Yes, part of that might be due to his riajuu qualities, but that wasn’t the only reason. Elementary schoolers are drawn to the most adult-like person present. Not understanding the adults’ way of doing things, they don’t put much thought into whom they hang out with. Source: my past self.

They know nothing of the value of money, the significance of studying and the meaning of love. Everything they are exposed to appears natural to them and they don’t comprehend where it all comes from. In those years, their understanding of the world only dips the surface. From middle school onwards, they learn about frustration and regret and despair, eventually coming to realise that this world is not an easy place to live in.

On the other hand, discerning children might have already learned about these things.

Like, for instance, that girl. She was the only one rejected from her group, and now she existed alone in the shadows.

To those elementary schoolers, a girl spending time on her own was probably everyday scenery. As such, they didn’t pay her much attention. But someone outside their little bubble would certainly pique their interest.

“Do you like curry?” Hayama called out to Rumi.

Seeing that, Yukinoshita sighed softly – so softly you wouldn’t even hear it. She thought the same way I did.

It was a poor move on Hayama’s part.

If you were going to call out to a loner, you ought to do it privately and in utter confidentiality. You had to give them maximum consideration and make sure no one was around to see it.

Being spoken to by a high schooler, not to mention one that stood out from the crowd as much as Hayama did, served to emphasise Rumi's uniqueness over the other girls, making her loner status stand out even more.

To put it in simple terms, it's like how pairing up with your teacher would make you feel more embarrassed than simply being alone. Their sympathy and pity hurts more than anything. *Quit being so nice to me*, you'd think. *Ignore me, damn it.*

Being colourless and invisible, you'd take no damage if left alone, but if you were lumped with your teacher, you'd face as much ridicule as an impotent virgin.

That's why it was a poor move.

If Hayama moved, those around him moved along with him. If the focus of their attention – the "oh so cool high schoolers" – lifted a finger, the elementary schoolers would follow in suit.

Rumi looked as if she had been driven into the spotlight in one fell swoop. Right now she was, quite literally, the centre of attention.

A mere loner had run up the stadium in one spurt. How nice, just like the Cinderella story. She was the Super-Dimension Cinderella[26]. And she lived happily ever after.

Of course, that's not how it goes.

If I could make a guess at what those elementary schoolers were thinking, it was probably not, "Eeeeek! Rumi-chan's getting spoken to by a high schooler! How cool! Please be my friend too!" and more like, "Huh? Why *her*?" She'd be getting curious glances from the high schoolers and jealousy and rage from her classmates. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

With that, Rumi was at a stalemate.

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No matter how she responded to Hayama's question, bad feelings would foster. If she answered him warmly, they'd be like, "She's so stuck up!" and if she answered him coldly, they'd be like, "What's up with her? She's so stuck up!" Regardless of what she did, she wouldn't escape negative judgement.

Surprise flickered across Rumi's face when Hayama spoke to her, but-

"…not particularly. Curry's not my thing," she answered curtly, feigning coolness, before slipping away from the spotlight.

In this situation, a tactical retreat was the only option. She had no cards or anything up her sleeve, after all.

As best she could, Rumi moved somewhere far from human eyes. She went outside the ring of people – that is, she went where I was. Incidentally, Yukinoshita was also keeping her distance from me, though she was on my side of the fence.

Uppity-type loners havr a wide personal area, not to mention Yukinoshita's strong threatening aura discouraged others from approaching. You could pretty much call it a feature of her personality. It was, in a word, stand-offishness. Why did I make that sound so dramatic? It was just simple fact.

[26] This is Ranka Lee's nickname in the anime *Macross Frontier*.

Rumi stood a metre away from me, stopping right between Yukinoshita and me. She kept enough distance to watch both of us from the corner of her eyes.

Hayama eyed Rumi with a slightly troubled and wistful smile on his face, but soon enough he was back with the other elementary schoolers.

“Okay, guys, you’ve done all the hard work, so you may as well put in some seasoning now! Anything you want to put in?” he asked. His voice was bright and charming, directing all attention towards himself.

Thanks to him, the resentful glares directed at Rumi came to a sudden halt.

The elementary schoolers raised their hands in chorus, suggesting coffee and capsicum and chocolate and everything in between.

“Yeeeep! I think fruits would be good! Like peaches and stuff!”

Oh, by the way, that was Yuigahama just now. Why the hell was she participating…? As you’d expect, Hayama’s expression also stiffened a little.

Not only did she participate in a children’s game, her utterance clearly displayed that she had the worst cooking skills among them.

Instantly regaining his calm demeanour, Hayama said something. Whatever it was, it made Yuigahama’s shoulders droop and she shuffled towards us slowly. Somehow, it seemed he had treated her very gently like a nuisance.

“What an idiot…” I blurted out.

A quiet, whispering voice picked up where I left off. “Honestly, what a bunch of fools…” Tsurumi Rumi said in a voice that sounded cold to my ears. That settles it – her nickname shall henceforth be Rumi Rumi. Was she from *Nadesico*[27]*?*

“Well, the majority of people are like that. Nice you picked up on that quickly,” I said.

Rumi looked at me, a puzzled expression on her face. Her gaze was also a measuring one, as if she was appraising my worth, so it left me slightly uncomfortable.

Noticing how Rumi was looking at me, Yukinoshita interjected. “You’re also part of the majority.”

“Don’t you underestimate me. I have the amazing talent of being a loner even when I’m part of the majority.”

“How like you to brag about something like that to such an extent. You’ve exceeded my expectations. You deserve scorn, not bafflement.”

“Don’t you normally respect someone if they exceed your expectations…?”

Rumi listened silently to our exchange, not once cracking a smile.

Sidling up to us a little bit closer, she called out to us. “Name.”

“Huh? What about names?” I asked her back, not understanding what she was saying just from the word ‘name’.

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[27] Ruri from the anime *Martian Successor Nadesico* is known for her superior attitude and her catchphrase “bunch of fools”. Her nickname is Ruri Ruri.

In response, Rumi repeated herself pompously, making herself quite clear. “I’m asking for your name. That’s normally how you’d interpret it.”

“…introduce yourself before you ask others for their names.” Yukinoshita’s gaze was dangerously sharp. Unfortunately for Rumi, it might have been her scariest look yet.

She sent her a glare – or, to be more accurate – a death glare. It seemed she had no intention of taking the fact she was talking to a child into consideration. Actually, Yukinoshita gave off a sterner impression than usual. Maybe she didn’t like kids all that much.

Her eyes must have struck fear in Rumi, because she looked away uncomfortably.

“…Tsurumi Rumi.”

Although she muttered the words out of the corner of her mouth, it wasn’t like you couldn’t hear her. Yukinoshita was of the same mind as me, it seemed. Once she heard Rumi’s name, she nodded curtly.

“I am Yukinoshita Yukino. That guy is… Hiki… Hikiga… Hikifroggaya-kun, was it?”

“Hey, how do you know my name from fourth grade? Towards the end, they just called me Froggy.”

At some point, I think they dropped the association with my surname and started treating me as a mere amphibian.

“I’m Hikigaya Hachiman.” Since I was gonna become Hikifroggaya-san at this rate, I introduced myself properly. “And this is Yuigahama Yui.” I pointed my finger at Yuigahama, who had now drawn quite close.

“What? You called?” Yuigahama spotted the three of us and seemed to intuit what we were up to. “Oh, right, right. I’m Yuigahama Yui. Tsurumi Rumi-chan, was it? Nice to meetcha.”

But Tsurumi Rumi only mustered a nod at Yuigahama’s greeting. She wouldn’t meet her eyes. As she looked down at her feet, she spoke up hesitantly. “Somehow , I get the feeling those two are different. Different from those guys.”

It was hard to understand her since the subject of her sentence was vague, but she probably meant that the two of us – Yukinoshita and I – were a different type of human being from those guys, i.e. Hayama and his crowd.

Well, we *were* different. When you looked at the group of people known as “those guys”, they seemed to be having the time of their lives with their special curry-making showdown.

“I’m different too. From those guys,” Rumi said, chewing on her words deliberately as if by stating them aloud she was confirming them to herself.

Yuigahama’s face turned grave. “What do you mean by different?”

“Everyone around me is a brat. Well, not like I was any better playing along with them. So I quit all that pointless stuff. I’m better off alone.”

“B-but.” Yuigahama seemed lost for words. “I think your elementary school friends and memories are important.”

“I don’t really need stuff like memories… when I enter middle school, I can make friends with people who come in from other schools.”

She lifted her head sharply, gazing at the sky. The sun was finally setting and the sky, indigo blue like diluted ink, was turning black. The stars had started blinking sporadically.

Rumi's faraway eyes were horribly sad, but at the same time, they held a beautiful ray of hope.

Tsurumi Rumi still believed; she still expected. She clung to the hope that things would improve for her if she entered a new environment.

And yet that hope was fruitless.

"Sorry to say this, but that's not happening."

The person who uttered that overly blunt assertion was Yukinoshita Yukino.

Rumi stared at her resentfully.

Yukinoshita met her gaze directly. "The people you go to elementary school with now will progress to the same middle school as you. In that case, history will only repeat itself," she declared coldly, not mincing any words. "Next time, those 'people who come in from other schools' will merely join in."

For those who graduated from a local public elementary school to a public middle school, the relationships they'd established until then would perpetuate themselves. You had to start with all the baggage you accumulated from elementary school. Even if you were to make new friends, your debts from the past would get in the way.

Your past would be shared around mercilessly, taking the form of funny stories and in-jokes. Once you were reduced to a handy communication tool for those boys and girls, you were finished.

Nobody said anything.

I was unable to form a rebuttal. Not only did I have no objections, Yuigahama also kept silent in discomfort. But even Rumi had nothing to say, not a single thing.

"You know that much, don't you?" Yukinoshita said, as if delivering the final blow.

Then, as she peered at the silent Rumi, she pursed her lips tightly, as if trying to withstand something. Maybe, just maybe, Yukinoshita could make out the face of her past in the girl in front of her.

"I knew it…" A small, resigned whisper slipped out of Rumi's mouth. "I was doing really dumb things," she muttered with self-derision.

"What happened?" Yuigahama asked gently.

"People got shunned by the group a bunch of times… but it stopped eventually and we talked to them again after that – it was something like a fad. Someone always suggested it and everyone would end up going along with it."

Rumi spoke coolly, but I got goosebumps listening to what she said. What was up with this story? It was scary as hell.

"Then, one of the popular and pretty talkative girls got shunned, and I kept my distance from her too, but… but before I knew it, I was next. It's not like I did anything wrong."

I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time. No, it's not like the people doing it had a clear reason in mind. They just had this strange feeling of obligation, like they *had* to do it.

“It’s ‘cos I blurted a lot of stuff to that girl, you see.”

Yesterday’s friend could turn your secret into a joke the next day for the sake of making someone laugh.

If you were a sixth grader, you probably had a crush. You’d be tempted to speak out to someone about those unfamiliar feelings of love you couldn’t handle. But because it was allso embarrassing, you confided to someone you trusted in a heart-to-heart conversation. I wondered why people spread rumours after saying, “I’ll definitely keep it a secret!” Were they the Dachou Club or something[28]?

I might talk about it with a laugh nowadays, but at the time I thought nothing could ever be more painful.

You were supposed to place your trust in someone and confide your secret, but it would bite you in the backside sooner or later.

There is no such thing as a stereotype bad man in this world. Under normal conditions, everybody is more or less good, or, at least, ordinary. But tempt them, and they may suddenly change. That is what is so frightening about men. One must always be on one’s guard.

All of a sudden, that quote came to mind.

There are no inherently bad people. Everyone believes that, myself included. I don’t doubt the existence of virtue.

And yet people bare their fangs when it seems they can profit.

People will rationalise their own behaviour whenever they become tainted with evil; they’re not supposed to be evil. In order to preserve their own twisted integrity, the world becomes twisted.

Someone you praised as “cool” until yesterday is “stuck up” today; someone you respected as “smart and knowledgeable” is now scorned as someone who “looks down on bad students”, and “energetic vigour” becomes “annoying and overly carried away”.

In order to convict crime in a twisted world, people wield a sword of justice. Since they can’t affirm themselves on their own, they team up with fellow conspirators. They talk among themselves about unscrupulousness and sinfulness as if it is a matter of course, and they’d purge the culture out of their feelings of justice. They’d make a mountain out of a molehill.

If that wasn’t deceit, what was it?

Inside that closed world, you’d shake with unease at the thought of being next. So before that can happen, you find a scapegoat.

Then the cycle continues. It never ends.

What meaning was there in building close friendships when you would be sacrificed for the sake of someone else’s dignity?

“I wonder if… this’ll happen in middle school too,” Rumi sobbed, her voice shaking.

A cry of delight rang out, as if drowning her out. It wasn’t even ten metres away, but the way I saw it, it was like something from a strange, far off land.

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[28] A popular Japanese comedy trio. Saying “I definitely won’t do ___!” and then ending up doing it anyway is one of their main gags

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A spoon hit the tableware with a clang.

Once we finished watching Rumi return silently to her group, a half-resigned expression plastered on her face, we immediately went back to our own base camp.

The potatoes in the curry Hiratsuka-sensei had kept watch over had blended together very nicely, and an appetising scent wafted from our outdoor cooking materials.

Close to the kitchen stood a wooden kitchen table filled with dishes, along with a pair of benches. We started looking for a place to sit.

Yukinoshita was the first one to sit down. She grabbed the corner seat without any hesitation. Next was Komachi. Naturally, she sat down next to Yukinoshita, with Yuigahama following in suit. Then came Ebina-san, surprisingly enough, while Miura sat down at the opposite corner. I thought Miura would have wanted to sit in the middle, but that wasn't happening, huh.

The guys chose their spots afterwards. Tobe parked himself in front of Miura. Well, that guy did seem as if he looked out for her. Next to him sat Hayama.

Since I'd be sitting next to people I didn't mind either way, my plan was to wait until everyone else made their choices. Come to think of it, whenever these group-picking things happened, I'd always wait till last. You know what I'm like. I'm a big-hearted man who gives up my turn out of the generosity in my soul.

It looked like whoever sat next to Hayama would be me, Totsuka or Hiratsuka-sensei.

"Um…" Totsuka looked at Hiratsuka-sensei and I, appearing deep in thought about how to make his move. "H-Hachiman, where would you like to sit?"

"Wherever is fine. I'm waiting till last."

"Saving the best till last – that kind of thing?" asked Totsuka.

"Er, not really…"

It was really just a matter of circumstances outside of my control creeping up on me, nothing at all to do with free thought or a personal creed.

"Saving the best till last… I see! I see now. I see how it is… I see that's how it must be," Hiratsuka-sensei muttered under her breath, her expression stricken as if she had just received a divine revelation. She was reacting way too sensitively to the word 'last'… someone please take her, for God's sake.

"Meh, I'll sit wherever…" I said. "Where are you sitting, Totsuka?"

"I don't mind sitting next to you."

I was speechless.

Totsuka had just said something unbelievably ludicrous, so it took me a while to react. Totsuka pressed a hand against his mouth as if he had also realised the implication of what he had just blurted out.

“Th-that came out kinda weird. I mean, we were busy with preparing the lunches and talking to the kids, so we never really got a chance to talk, that’s all…” he added in explanation, although the core of what he was saying remained unchanged. In fact, it felt more lovey dovey than before.

“Well, whatever you say. Let’s sit down.” Out of embarrassment and a good deal of bashfulness, I pushed Totsuka’s back, urging him on.

Damn it, why did this guy’s back have to be so thin? He was so light that he made no resistance whatsoever when I pushed him.

“Okay, I’ll sit here.” Totsuka beckoned to me eagerly under the table where nobody could see.

“…ah.”

Having confirmed my eyes weren’t deceiving me, I sat beside him. My jaw was slack, so I pretended to stifle a yawn with one hand.

“Now then, shall we dig in?” Finally, Hiratsuka-sensei sat down on the edge beside me.

At her signal, everyone clapped their hands together lightly and said, “Itadakimasu.”

Now that I thought about it, I had a feeling it had been quite a while since I had last eaten with so many people gathered in one place. Even though it had been two years ago at most, it felt like quite a long time.

“It’s like a school lunch,” Totsuka whispered stealthily into my ear, as if he felt the same way I did.

“Mm, and curry’s on the menu here too.” I mustered some generic response, trembling because of how much closer we were than usual.

“Boys sure like curry. They kick up a huge fuss when curry’s on the menu,” Yuigahama said in a nostalgic tone.

It seemed we had a similar experience with school lunches, curry and noisy boys in elementary and middle school. That’s how it worked in my school. “Yeah, yeah. And when the person on lunch duty upset the curry pot, he’d cop so much flack for it.”

Tobe laughed as he shovelled curry into his mouth. “Totally, man!”

“Then, that person on lunch duty was blamed for it in class, y’know, and because of that whole curry thing he had to wear a white coat and go around to the other classes handing out the rest of the curry, but just because his curry got stolen by one of the other classes, the teacher on patrol told him off and he got so miserable he shed a few tears in the hallway, but the absolute worst thing about it was that the stain on his coat wouldn’t come off so the next time he was on duty, people were all like, ‘his coat stinks of curry (lol)’ and his nickname became Kareishu[29]. That sort of thing happens too.”

“No, it doesn’t…” said Yuigahama.

“Why was that so detailed…? Personal experience?” Yukinoshita asked.

Their hands, still holding their spoons, stopped in midair.

“That stain really wouldn’t come off so I was super worried…” said Komachi.

[29] Kareishu means old man smell. It is a particular concern among Japanese people.

Enter *Everyone Feel Sorry for Hikigaya* mode. Thanks to the ensuing silence, I could easily hear the bell crickets chirp brightly.

Hayama coughed lightly in an attempt to smooth things over. “Well, all the guys like curry so I guess they’d be seething. There’s also Malt Jelly days.”

Crap, this was getting really nostalgic. That mysterious jelly had a distinctive flavour, almost like Milo. Man, did it hit the spot. Nobody ever dreamed of skipping that day.

Hayama went on. “I asked my friends living in other prefectures, but it seems Malt Jelly is only served in school lunches in Chiba.”

“Huh?!”

“Really?!”

“I-is that true?”

Yuigahama, Miura and Komachi could not contain their surprise.

“Hey hey, isn’t it generally an unlucky symbol in the regions that aren’t considered prefectures?” I narrowly avoided losing hope in all of Japan.

Even Ebina-san was speechless. Everyone present started kicking up a stir, buzzing with interest.

Hayama’s Chiba trivia was causing an eruption.

However, you couldn’t dub him the Chibapedia from this level of knowledge. Everyone else could lose! Only I had no intention of losing when it came to Chiba! “Did you know? Miso peas are only served in school lunches at Chiba?”

“Yeah, I knew.”

“Who wouldn’t know?”

“I mean, only people from Chiba eat them at home.”

Everyone’s reaction was way too cold. Also, I see Madame Miura’s folks regularly ate miso peas at home. We don’t eat them at our place, damn it.

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The shriek of a steaming kettle shattered the silence. Even though the kettle was simply enormous, it let out a shrill alarm.

Komachi sprang to her feet and started pouring out the boiling water over a teabag.

Nights were slightly chilly on the plateau, but since the elementary schoolers were starting to clear out and a calm was settling in, it felt even colder than before. The treetops rustled in the wind, and I could hear the murmuring of a faraway stream.

It should be lights out for the kids about now. Still, it wasn't like they'd sleep tight when they were with their friends. They'd probably hit each other with their pillows, lay out snacks on their futons and spend the night chatting.

Still, a percentage of children did go to bed straight away. The kids who weren't part of the in-group would endeavour to sleep earlier, even if it was just by a small margin. It wasn't because they couldn't stand being friendless or anything. They were just looking out for the others so that they could enjoy the night without disruption. Well, not that anyone would notice anyway.

So come on, could they stop pulling pranks on my sleeping body and giggling about it? How about they quit playing around taking photos of me in that situation? Please? I guess that counted as caring about my existence.

Hayama put down his paper cup tentatively. "Right now, I guess we might be having a conversation like the ones you have on a school trip at night." His voice was that of someone recalling something from long ago.

Our high school grade hadn't been on a school trip yet. It was scheduled for the second semester of eleventh grade. Once again, I awaited my simple task of walking three steps behind my classmates and falling asleep at night straight away.

But it was only simple to me because I had overcome it; to someone trapped in that vortex right now, it would be nothing but a slog.

"I wonder if she'll be okay…" Yuigahama asked me a little worriedly.

I didn't have to ask what she was talking about. It was probably Tsurumi Rumi. Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and I, who had spoken to her directly, weren't the only ones who had grasped that she was friendless. Everyone could see it. Not only did she stand out, anyone would understand her situation just by looking.

Someone struck a match. The side of Hiratsuka-sensei's cool visage was illuminated under a tree's shadow. When she took a shallow puff from her cigarette, the tobacco smoke floated in the air. The smoke wavered when she readjusted her legs.

"Hmph. Something on your mind?" she asked.

Hayama was the one to answer. "Well, there's a student who's kinda isolated from the others…"

"Yeah, I feel sorry for her," Miura chimed in. Since she was agreeing with Hayama just to fill in the conversation, she said it as if it was obvious.

That made something in my chest twinge just a little. "You're wrong, Hayama," I said, filling in the pause. "You don't understand where the real root of the problem lies. There's nothing inherently wrong with being friendless or alone. The problem is that she was forced into isolation out of malicious intent."

"Huh? Something the matter?" Miura demanded. I meant to talk to Hayama, but it was Miura who answered instead. Scary.

"There are people who like being alone and people who don't. That kind of thing, you know?"

"Oh, I guess."

That's why the ideal solution was not to single her out but to improve the environment that had forced her into isolation.

"So what do you guys wanna do?" Hiratsuka-sensei asked us.

“Well…”

We all fell into silence.

What did everyone want to do? Nothing much, really. They just wanted to talk about it.

Basically, it was like watching a documentary on war or poverty on the TV and saying “*oh no”* and “*we have to do something”*, while at the same time not lifting a finger from your comfy couch as you gobbled down tasty food.

In that case, it wasn’t as if anyone was going to start doing anything. They’d lie to themselves and be all, “Today I realised how grateful I am for my good fortune”, and that would be the end of that. They might perhaps spare ten yen or a hundred yen for a fundraiser. But that was pretty much it.

Of course, there are people who take their awareness of the problem and seriously attempt to grapple with it. That really is a great thing, and I respect and commend it. Fundraisers are a big help to people in need.

But we were different. Me, Hayama, Miura – there was nothing we could do and nothing we had set our minds to accomplish. Even as we were aware of that, even as we made ineffectual excuses, we wanted others to know about our tender emotions.

Though we were not involved, we could not claim ignorance now that we had seen the problem for ourselves. But there was nothing we could do. That’s why we wanted to at least feel sorry for her – that kind of thing. Those feeling were beautifully noble, yet at the same time a horrible excuse. It was nothing more than a logical extension of that deceitful youth I so despised.

“I…” Someone spoke up.

It was Hayama, who had shut his mouth so heavily before.

“I’d like to do something to help her if I can.”

It was a very Hayama-like expression. They were kind words. They were unkind only to Rumi. To those close to Hayama as he spoke, they were very kind words indeed.

A kind lie that would hurt no one. It would only make hope flicker, although the despair was wrapped inside the roundabout phrasing. The possibility that it could not be done loomed unspoken, and everyone was free to interpret it as they wished.

“It’s impossible for you. That’s how it was, right?”

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It was Yukinoshita’s voice that cut through those vague and comfortable words. In the dead of the night, a lantern light illuminated her features. As she flicked her hair behind her, her cold gaze pierced Hayama.

She had made that assertion as if it was a patently obvious fact, not bothering to seek an explanation. I wondered if she was talking about what Hayama had said to Rumi earlier.

For a moment, I caught a glimpse of Hayama’s pained expression, as if his very insides had been set afire. “That… might have been how it was.” For a moment, he couldn’t speak. “But this time, it’ll be different.”

“I wonder about that.” Yukinoshita shrugged at Hayama’s answer. It was a cold dismissal.

As we watched this unexpected exchange, a heavy silence hung over the proceedings.

Just like the others, I kept my mouth shut as I peered at Hayama and Yukinoshita. I’d sensed it that time when Hayama came to the Service Club room, but the hardened attitude Yukinoshita showed towards him now was different from her ordinary self.

Her usual coldness was merely an expression of stand-offishness, but there was a definite sense of forcefulness in Yukinoshita’s words just now.

It was clear as day that something had happened between the two of them, something I didn’t know about. But well, cool story, bro. I didn’t really care either way, but this uncomfortable mood was kind of scary. Ouch.

“Good grief…” Hiratsuka-sensei lit another cigarette, bringing attention to herself. Slowly and leisurely, she took a long puff before crushing the cigarette against the ashtray and turning her attention to Yukinoshita. “What about you, Yukinoshita?”

In response to that question, Yukinoshita put a hand on her chin. “There’s one thing I’d like to confirm,” she said after some thought.

“What is it?”

“Hiratsuka-sensei, I believe you said this also functioned as a training camp for the Service Club, so would this girl’s circumstances also be considered part of our club activities?”

Hiratsuka-sensei thought about Yukinoshita’s question for a while and then quietly gave her consent.

“…mm. Yeah, it would be. I assigned you as volunteer staff at this outdoor school as part of your club activities. In theory, this matter should fit in that category too.”

“I see…” Yukinoshita responded, and with that she closed her eyes.

The wind blowing the foliage was steadily becoming weaker. It seemed as if even the forest was straining its ears to listen to her voice, desperate not to miss a word. Nobody made a sound; they just waited.

“If that girl seeks help, we will make use of every means at our disposal,” Yukinoshita declared, her voice firm with conviction. A frigid and unwavering will lay behind those words.

You’re way too cool, Yukinoshita. If I were a girl, I’d be totally head over heels for her right now. I mean, come on, Yuigahama and Komachi were already enraptured by her.

That answer seemed to satisfy even Hiratsuka-sensei, because she nodded eagerly. “So is she looking for help, you think?”

“…that I do not know.”

Right, it wasn’t like she had asked us for anything. It wasn’t like we had explicitly confirmed her desires.

Yuigahama tugged on Yukinoshita’s sleeve. “You know, Yukinon, I don’t think that girl can talk about it even if she wants to.”

“You mean nobody would believe her or something?” I asked.

Yuigahama hesitated a little before she answered. “Yeah, that could be it too, but… Rumi-chan said herself that a lot of people got shunned. She was in on it herself at the time. I guess she wouldn’t be able to stand it if she was the only one who asked for help. I don’t think Rumi-chan’s the only one in the wrong – everyone’s like that… even if they want to talk it out and get along, they just can’t find the right moment. But they still feel guilty…”

Yuigahama cut off her words there. Ever so slightly, she fought to control her breathing, and then she laughed sheepishly in order to change the subject.

“Aha, that was a bit… er, *very* embarrassing thing to say. I mean, it takes a lot of courage to talk to someone everyone else isn’t talking to.”

Yukinoshita gazed at Yuigahama’s smile, a bright look in her eyes.

Under normal circumstances, it would take courage to talk to a loner indeed. Yuigahama had been nervous about entering the clubroom at first. And yet she overcame that and spoke to Yukinoshita and me.

That probably did make her seem dazzling to the eye.

“But y’know, maybe Rumi-chan’s class can’t *not* go along with it? *If I speak up, I might get shunned too,* I’d think, so I’d be like *gotta put some distance between us for now* or *I want some time to prepare*, and then I’d end up like that too… oh nooooo! I said something really horrible just now, didn’t I?! Will I be okay?!”

Yuigahama jumped in alarm and peered at everyone around her for their reaction. But not a single person showed her any animosity. Everyone had a smile on their lips betraying difficult emotions – pained smiles and surprise and sentimentality.

Yuigahama really was amazing. If I were a girl, I’m sure I’d want to be her friend.

“You’ll be fine. I think that was very characteristic of you…” Yukinoshita answered softly in a whisper. Even though it was so quiet, hers was the kind of voice that betrayed deep emotion.

Yuigahama seemed to have been embarrassed by what Yukinoshita said, because her face turned red and she fell silent.

Hiratsuka-sensei flashed a smile at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. “Is there anyone who disagrees with Yukinoshita’s conclusion?” She left her words hanging and turned her head around slowly, inspecting everyone’s reaction.

But nobody raised their voice in objection. If I were to put my finger on it, I got the feeling it was more correct to say that nobody *could* raise their voice. Saying crap like “As if I’m gonna help someone out! I’m going back to my room!” would signal your death flag.

“Good. Now then, I’ll leave it to you guys to think about what to do. I’m getting some shut-eye.”

And with that, Hiratsuka-sensei stifled a yawn and stood up from her seat.

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A few minutes after it had been unanimously decided that we’d deal with the problem, the conversation started unravelling at the seams.

The topic of discussion: “How can we make Tsurumi Rumi fit in?”

Miura was the one who got the ball rolling. “C’mon, she’s pretty cute, so she should hang out with the other cute girls, don’cha think? Like, a word here, a word there, and you’re best buds. No sweat, yeah?”

“Yeah, man. You da boss, Yumiko!”

“Heh, I know, right?”

Wow, Miura, wooooow. That was the logic of the super elite for you. And for good old Tobe to go along with it, man, he really was a swell guy. Such logic, many respect.

“Y-you can only do that because you’re Yumiko.” As you’d expect, Yuigahama did not approve.

Still, that explained a few things. So one of the reasons Miura hung out with Yuigahama was because of her looks. Well, I do admit Yuigahama was easy on the eyes. And I guess she did have a nice figure. But since she was a defenceless idiot and all, you had to watch out for her.

“She might have phrased it poorly, but what Yumiko’s saying about creating a foothold is right. Still, under these circumstances, it might difficult getting her to speak up in the first place.” Hayama came to Miura’s defence while simultaneously refuting her, thereby invoking his diplomatic refusal skill.

Miura pulled an ever so slightly sour face, but she played along with him. “Oh, right,” she said, backing down.

Next, it was Ebina-san who raised her hand, her expression brimming with confidence.

“Go ahead, Hina.” Hayama referred to her by name.

Wait, who? I thought.

Totsuka tugged on my shirt. “Hina is Ebina-san’s first name. It’s written with the characters for princess and broccolini.”

My confusion must have shown on my face because Totsuka whispered the answer into my ear. His breath felt tickly and had a nice scent. Shit! Why did a *boy* have to resemble a flower so much?

Ebina-san’s full name was Ebina Hina. Chi can remember[30]. Not that I had any use for it, seriously.

Ebina-san said her piece calmly. “It’s quite all right. She’ll be fine if she lives for her hobbies. Once you devote yourself to your hobbies, you end up going to events and your friendship circle expands, you know? I’m sure she’ll find a place she can truly call home. She’ll realise that school is not the end of the world. And then she’ll learn to have fun doing other things.”

I was surprised; that was a better thought-out response than I expected. That part about school not being the end of the world especially rang true. When you’re in elementary school and middle school, your world revolves around school and home. That’s why being rejected at those places felt like the end of the world. But Ebina-san was saying that wasn’t the case, that you ought to search for a place outside of school where you could act yourself and be forward-looking.

Ah, now I get it. Get into another community and you could find a place to belong, and from there your world would expand. And plus, from the way she spoke, Ebina-san seemed to have been enlightened through personal experience.

[30] Chobits reference. This is what Chi says when she remembers things as she becomes a more functional robot.

Ebina-san went on even further.

“I made friends through BL! There’s no such thing as a girl who hates queers[31]! So Yukinoshita, please be my-”

“Yumiko, go grab some tea with Hina,” Hayama cut in quickly.

Miura stood up and grabbed Ebina-san’s arm. “Okey-dokey. C’mon, Ebina, let’s go.”

“Ahhh! But I was in the middle of converting her!” Ebina-san struggled vainly, only to get knocked smartly on the head and dragged off into oblivion.

[31] This is a quote by Ohno, one of the fujoshi characters from the manga *Genshiken.*

Yukinoshita watched her disappear into the distance, her expression stiff with terror.

"I wonder if she was trying to recommend me something…"

"You're better off not knowing, Yukinon…" Yuigahama answered her rather wearily. I see, so Ebina-san had tried proselytising her too.

Not to mention that even if you did, say, make friends through BL, you'd have shipping wars, and if you tried to get chummy with someone you thought was a fujoshi, you'd never see eye to eye on just female otaku things. It wouldn't be pretty. The world of hobbies was yet another place where woe betided you.

After that, some more opinions trickled out, but no realistic plans were forthcoming.

Without any stimulating debate, the number of opinions shared dropped accordingly. Source: an unmotivated class. Why did they only share their opinions when shooting me down? Those guys raised their hands way more often than they did in class, damn it.

During that moment of awkward silence, Hayama uttered one thing as if he'd realised something.

"…unless we think of a way to make everyone get along, will we ever solve the root of the problem?" he asked.

A dry laugh slipped out of me unconsciously. Hayama stared hard at me.

But this was the only time I would not avert my gaze or mumble something noncommittal. With absolute confidence on my side, I sneered at Hayama's idea to his face.

As I expected, this guy didn't get the root of the problem.

The words *everyone get along* were the main culprit in and of itself. It was an accursed phrase.

Those words emphasised the problem. They were Geass[32].

It was an evil law imposed by teachers in a narrow-minded world. For the sake of complying with that law, they forcefully established the tactic known as "turning a blind eye" to the friction that inevitably ensued. It showed in how they handled personality types that didn't adhere to the mainstream. There were cases when you have to deal with those you hated, too. In those situations, if you spelled out "I hate you" or "I don't want to put up with you" to them, things could possibly change. There was also a chance things could improve or open up to negotiation. But that became impossible when you stifled your problems and only smoothed over the surface issues.

It was tacit approval of the lazy deceit known as 'tone policing'. That's why I shot down Hayama's words.

I wasn't the only one to do that.

"That is impossible. There is not one possibility of it happening."

Yukinoshita's supremely cool-headed words, coupled with her frigid tone of voice, crushed Hayama's opinions more than my sneering ever could.

With a short, terse sigh, Hayama averted his gaze.

Miura, noticing this display, cried out in retaliation. "Hey, Yukinoshita-san! What's up with you?"

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[32] A reference to the supernatural powers in *Code Geass.*

“What ever do you mean?” Yukinoshita responded to Miura’s rough tone with exquisite coolness.

That just made Miura flare up even more. “I’m talking about your attitude. Everyone’s pushing themselves to get along here, so just why do you have to say that crap? I really don’t like you one bit, but I’m putting up with you because this is supposed to be a fun trip.”

“Th-there, there, Yumiko.” Yuigahama tried to pacify Miura, who was trembling with rage.

But Yukinoshita, on the other hand, was cool as a cucumber. “Oh my, you had a surprisingly high opinion of me. I loathe you, however.”

“Y-you keep it down too, Yukinon!” Yuigahama, who was sandwiched between them, focused on extinguishing Yukinoshita’s ire this time. *It takes guts, kid! You’re a little firefighter*[33]*!*

But the normal method of extinguishing fire was not always necessarily correct. From what I’ve heard, pouring water on a chemically induced fire makes it flare up instead.

This was one of those times.

“Excuse me, Yui?” The Fiery Queen snapped her eyes open.

“…whose side are you on?” The Icy Witch called out, her tone frigid.

You could see they were strongest when you combined the two. What was this – Medoroa? Even the Great Demon King Vearn would be in jeopardy[34].

Yuigahama shrank away out of morbid fear. She was shaking violently.

Oh man, how scary.

“This tea’s so nice, Totsuka. That reminds me, I wonder how Zaimokuza’s doing right now. Wonder if he’s doing okay.”

“Hachiman, face reality…”

No way, it was too scary. Don’t make me.

Yukinoshita and Miura glared at each other. But since three people sat between them, it didn’t seem the situation would escalate any further, thankfully enough. Separating kids that don’t get along works wonders, seriously. Since they were on opposite edges of the same row, their eyes wouldn’t meet either.

From her position in the buffer zone, Komachi spoke up as if she had suddenly thought of something. “But from what I’ve seen of her, Rumi-chan seems to have a pretty blunt personality, so even if we put her in a group of other elementary schoolgirls, it’ll be hard for her to blend in. Don’t you think she’d be able to get along with the show off-types if she were a little older?”

Like Komachi said, Rumi was probably the type of person who would enjoy school life in the future. There was no doubt the boys would make a fuss over her, even if her relationship with the other girls never improved. Some girls might very well notice that and want to be friends with her. Damn, thinking about this was making my blood boil.

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[33] This is a line from the manga *Firefighter! Daigo of Fire Company M*.

[34] In the *Dragon Quest* spin-off manga *Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai* , Medoroa is a spell that combines fire and ice. The Great Demon King Vearn is the villain.

Hayama nodded along in agreement to what Komachi said. “Yeah, she does give off a kind of cold or maybe subdued vibe.”

“Cold, you say? Isn’t she just sitting on her high horse? It’s her condescending attitude that got her shunned. Like a certain someone we know.” Miura laughed scornfully.

“You just have a persecution complex,” Yukinoshita said indifferently. It didn’t sound as if she was talking about just Miura. “You’re aware of your inferiority, so you feel as if you’re being looked down upon, am I not correct?”

Miura scowled. “Look you, it’s because you say crap like that.” She shot up from the bench like a rocket.

“Yumiko, stop it.”

Hayama’s low voice stopped Miura in her tracks.

Gone was his glib joking from before, replaced by steely pressure. To be blunt, he was kind of scary…

“Hayato… hmph!”

For a moment, Miura seemed stunned at Hayama’s attitude, but she backed down without resistance. After that, she refused to open her mouth altogether.

A gloomy silence fell over the proceedings. In the end, nobody was in the mood for any talking, and all we decided on was that we’d work things out the next day. Well, I guess this was how politics worked.

Still, you know how it was. If even we high schoolers couldn’t get along, it was clearly beyond us to make all those elementary schoolers do the same.

Chapter 5: Alone, Yukinoshita Yukino Gazes at the Night Sky

Kapon – came the distinctive sound of the bath. I've always wondered about this, but where does this *kapon* noise come from anyway? Is it the sound of the bathtub?

Once I finished soaking my head, body and face, I dipped myself in the hot water. It felt very much like a hot spring. As my sweat washed away, I felt keenly that my body was being cleansed.

There was a large public bath in the visitor house. As per the norm for school trips and outdoor ed camps, boys and girls had different bath hours. Since our conversation a while ago had gone overtime, it seemed only one group could enter the bath at a time. Clearly, we needed separate times for the boys, girls and Totsuka.

As a result of our negotiations, the boys were allowed to use the indoor bath. It was just, well – since this didn't differ too much from a normal bath at home, you had to go one at a time. Come to think of it, not many guys would be thrilled about bathing together, so this arrangement was fine by me.

It wasn't like I couldn't bathe with Totsuka, but that was… well, uh, *you know*. If by some chance Totsuka happened to be a girl, my Gae Bolg would most definitely activate, and if he were a boy, my Gae Bolg would still activate – either way, my Gae Bolg would end up activating[35].

That's why this arrangement was fine by me.

With the boy's bath, I didn't have much time for anything but a quick dip. If Totsuka had just been in this bath, I would have taken my time soaking up in it, but since I had gotten in right after Tobe and Hayama, I made a quick and smooth exit.

In the changing room (which really wasn't very large at all) I wiped myself thoroughly, and then rummaged the box I'd put my clothes in.

"My underwear, my underwear… huh?"

The moment I found my underwear, the door opened. In other words, I had no time to put on my underwear. *Oh no! Master, the enemy has arrived >_<*[36]!

When the door flung open, the face that came into view belonged to none other than Totsuka.

"Er, uh…"

"…"

BRAIN CANNOT COMPUTE.

"…"

---

[35] The Gae Bolg is a mythical Celt spear, popularised by the Type Moon franchise. Here, it seems to be a euphemism for Hachiman's p-

[36] A quote from the eroge *Koihime Musou.*

And now, time resumes[37].

[37] This is a quote from Dio Brando from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* when he uses his Stand ability.

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“W-waaaaaah! S-sorry!”

“A-aaaaaargh! I-I’m sorry too!”

A flustered Totsuka slammed the door shut. For my part, I wasted no time changing into my clothes. My underwear was securely Pileder On[38]. After that, I put on a T-shirt and some half pants. I doubt any of this took longer than ten seconds.

“I-it’s okay now,” I called out to the door.

Ever so slowly, the door creaked open three centimetres exactly. Totsuka peeked in through the gap just to make sure I was clothed. Sighing with relief, he stepped into the changing room.

“S-sorry. I thought you were already out…” Totsuka apologised, bowing his head. But when he lifted his head and his eyes met mine, he let out a little shriek and quickly averted his gaze, his face reddening.

…why was he blushing? This was starting to make *me* feel embarrassed.

“O-okay, I’ll have a bath now,” he said.

“S-sure.”

And with that response, we once again stared at each other wordlessly.

“Um… I’m taking off my clothes now…” Totsuka looked up at me with teary eyes. As he pinched the sleeves of his shirt, he gazed at me reproachfully. “If you keep looking at me… it’ll be awkward.”

“Oh, right. I’ll get going now.”

Well, I guess being stared at while you were changing was bound to feel unpleasant, even if another guy was the one doing it.

I closed the door of the changing room and started walking. As I shuffled away, I could hear the sound of the water and it bothered me ridiculously.

In any case, this situation was way different from the “walk in on someone in the bath” event I knew of. Romcom God, you, my lord, are an idiot.

At least reverse the positions… no, that would still be stupid.

xxxx

Hayama and Tobe were already in the bungalow.

The two of them were playing with their cell phones, looking like they didn’t know what to do with themselves. Hayama’s finger was flitting rapidly over his tablet. Indeed, his cool and stylish gestures had a manly sort of vibe to it. I’ll say it however many times it takes, but the people using those sorts of devices don’t know how cool they look, although they ought to be aware that they’re not the cool ones – their devices are.

[38] A reference to the mecha in Mazinger Z. Also, a pun on the English phrase “piled on”.

Playing cards were scattered around their feet, but there was no way in hell they'd play with me. Hayama and Tobe engaged in some friendly chatter from time to time, but only between themselves.

I took the liberty of laying out my futon in the very corner of the room, and once I filled up my spot, I lay down restlessly. I tried looking in my baggage, but there didn't appear to be any particular time-killing tool. Not even Komachi could prepare that far ahead in advance at such short notice, it seemed.

Well, these days, you could do pretty much anything if you had a cell phone. I waited for fatigue to set in as I played around with my phone, tapping buttons here and there.

As I did so, I could hear the two guys having a conversation from where I lay on my back.

"Yo, whatcha lookin' at, Hayato-kun? Porn?"

"Nah, I'm just looking at a reference book. It's a PDF, though."

"Whoa, that sounded uber smart, yo!"

I didn't think there was anything at all smart about this conversation.

Still, it was a good thing to carry around reference books as PDFs. Imagine how heavy you'd be if you were a walking encyclopedia. I can't even remember the contents of one book.

"Hayama, you're so smart," I said to myself, not particularly caring whether anyone heard me or not. This was a loner's way of talking.

But Hayama, who was the incarnation of mistaken kindness, wouldn't let that one go. "I'm not really that smart, you know."

"Hold up, Hayato-kun, your grades are sick. Where are you ranked in literature again?"

I thought normally you used the word 'sick' to refer to something bad, but young people these days used it for the opposite meaning. It's the same thing as saying, "I don't like you at all, big brother[39]!"

"Well, my grades are okay, I guess…" Hayama answered with a vague, somewhat troubled smile.

Okay, so was this guy one of *those* types? The ones who spout kinda irritating things like how exam results and intellect are two different things?

"You say you're only okay, Hayato-kun, but aren't you the top dog?"

"But Yukinoshita-san's above me, you know."

…

Okay, I get it. I totally get it now.

I'm talking about why I always ended up in third place.

The truth was that the first and second places were already set in stone.

Good looks, personality and brains… what a nightmare. It was like Goku and Vegeta did a Potara fusion[40]. Why was this guy even alive? At least let me win at Japanese, damn it.

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[39] That's the title of the light novel *Oniichan no Koto Nanka Zenzen Suki Janain Dakara ne-!!*

Just as I was determined to fall asleep, the door swung open.

There was a sigh. “I’m out of the bath now…”

Totsuka, who had now returned to us, closed the door behind him. As he passed close beside me, wiping his still slightly dripping hair with a towel, the scent of his shampoo wafted off him. Totsuka plopped down and started drying his hair with a dryer he retrieved from his bag.

Having recently been in the water, the contrast between his damp hair and flushed skin was strangely sensual. I ended up staring at him in spite of myself, entranced.

Finally, Totsuka flicked his hair just to make sure it wasn’t still wet, before sighing in satisfaction. “I’m done now…”

“Let’s get some sleep, then,” Hayama answered Totsuka.

Tobe and Totsuka started making their preparations for bed too. I didn’t have to do that since I’d already rolled my futon out. Man, I must be psychic.

With a great deal of effort, Totsuka carried his futon and laid it out beside me. As he patted his pillow, he glanced at me through the corner of his eyes.

“Is it… fine here?”

“…yeah.”

When we got a good, hard look at each other, I could sense the awkwardness of our bathroom encounter in the air. It was embarrassing to think about. Totsuka had gotten an eyeful of me… I’d have to take responsibility.

But Totsuka, for his part, didn’t seem overly concerned, and he rolled into his futon rather blithely. *Hey, come on.* In that position, we’d end up kissing if he turned over.

Hayama, who had finished setting up his bed, reached his hand out towards the light switch. “I’m turning off the lights.”

And with a *ping*, the light bulb went out.

“Man, Hayato-kun,” said Tobe. “This feels like a night on the school trip, yo.”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

That was quite a noncommittal response. Maybe Hayama was pretty tired as well.

“…let’s talk about who we like,” Tobe suggested.

“I’m not in the mood.”

Much to my surprise, Hayama refused in no uncertain terms.

“Ahaha… it’s a bit embarrassing,” Totsuka laughed quietly, sounding ill at ease.

---

[40] Goku and Vegeta are the two protagonists in *Dragon Ball Z.* When they perform the Potara fusion, their powers are combined.

“How come?! Don’t be shy. Spill the beans, yo! I’ve got it! I’ll say who I like first.” This guy was just pretending to have a conversation; he really only wanted to do was talk about himself…

Hayama and Totsuka must have had the same impression as me, because I heard a sigh along with a dry chuckle.

“The truth is, I-”

Nothing much to see here. Tobe was going to tell us all about his crush on Miura.

“-think Ebina-san’s kinda cute.”

“…seriously?!” I blurted out upon hearing those unexpected words.

“Huh?” Tobe hesitated as he responded to me, as if for a moment he had no idea whose voice had called out to him. “Y-yeah. Oh right, Hikitani-kun’s listening! I thought you were asleep since you weren’t makin’ a peep!”

“Yeah, but I’m surprised,” said Totsuka. “I thought you liked Miura-san, Tobe-kun.”

“Nah, Yumiko doesn’t do it for me… she scares me.”

So he thought she was scary as well. That meant pretty much every guy was frightened of her when you did the math. Whoa whoa, this didn’t mean everyone believes in evil spirits now, did it? By now, she struck so much fear you could say ours was a haunted class.

“But still, you only really talk to Miura-san, don’t you?” asked Totsuka.

“Oh, yeah… that’s, like, ‘cos I have to? He that would the daughter win, must with the mother first begin – that kind of thing.”

“I don’t think Miura would appreciate you saying that,” I said.

But I could relate to Tobe to a surprising extent. Not being able to talk to the girl you like is something guys can understand very well.

“Yui’s pretty nice too, but she’s kinda air-headed, ya know?”

Oh, yeah. She was pretty air-headed. But for someone as idiotic as him to say that was pretty much the pot calling the kettle black.

“Also, it’s obvious she’s popular, so there’s lots of competition.”

…

Well, yeah, I guess.

Nice girls are popular. It’s scary how unpopular and clueless guys are so attracted to them. They reeled you in hook, line and sinker. You ended up blue in the face like Grander Musashi[41].

That’s why I won’t get surprised I won’t tremble I won’t get taken off guard I won’t be shocked I won’t tremble I won’t get surprised. What the hell? I was trembling like a leaf.

[41] A fishing manga.

Indifferent to my quiet sighing, Tobe went on. “Ebina-san is, well, lots of guys are put off by her so that actually gives me a chance, ya know?”

It was true that Ebina-san not only belonged to the school’s top caste, she had a cute face to boot. It was just that her unique hobbies caused guys to keep their distance from her. Still, she made no secret of her hobby, and one couldn’t help but get the impression that her openness was a defence tactic to her. If she was the real deal, she’d be hiding it, I reckon. Nah, I might be reading too much into it.

Perhaps he realised he was talking only about himself. Tobe addressed us all directly with a question. “What about you guys?”

“You mean what girl I like?” Totsuka thought about it. “A girl, huh? Hm. There’s no one in particular.”

Totsuka didn’t have a crush on a girl. Th-then did he have a crush on a boy, I wonder? My heart thumped quickly.

For some reason, Tobe completely overlooked me. “What about you, Hayato-kun?” he said to Hayama.

“Me, I… oh, never mind.”

“Hold on just a sec, Hayato-kun. That won’t do. You have a crush, don’cha? You gotta spill, man.”

Hayama said nothing.

“Just tell us the initial,” Tobe insisted.

Hayama sighed resignedly. “Y,” he said, after a considerable pause.

“Y, huh. Wait, does that mean-”

“That’s enough already. It’s time to sleep.”

Hayama’s voice sounded angry for once, as if he was not about to permit any more probing. It was rare to see Hayama, who was normally so nice to everyone and his dog, get so pissed off. To put it another way, his attitude towards Tobe might be proof that he was human after all.

“I can’t sleep now that I’m curious! If I die of insomnia, it’s your fault, Hayato-kun!” Tobe waved off Hayama’s anger with a light joke. These guys had the skill of manipulating the mood so that things wouldn’t get too out of hand. Cracking jokes was a standard tactic for avoiding a sour mood or relationship.

For a while as the quiet darkness reigned, I stared blankly into the void.

Just who did this ‘Y’ Hayama had mentioned refer to?

A number of names came to mind.

xxxx

Thanks to how things had gotten so weirdly gloomy, I couldn’t sleep even though everyone else had gone quiet.

When I turned over in my sleep, Totsuka’s face was right there in front of me. I could hear him breathing rhythmically in his sleep.

"…nnggh."

A sigh slipped out of me.

The moonlight coming through the window illuminated Totsuka's face. As his alluring lips whispered someone's name, he wriggled slightly. A soft, dazed smile came over his face; he seemed happy over something.

As soon as I noticed it, I just couldn't help being fixated on Totsuka's mouth. I was hyper aware of his faint snoring and even the sound of him shuffling as he turned over in bed.

"I don't think I can sleep like this…"

When I peered at the cell phone in my hand, it wasn't even 11:00, surprisingly enough. It seemed time passed slower the further you went from the city. The noisy trains and the twinkling city lights were gone as well. It was a quiet night.

I figured that the feel of the night wind against my skin would calm me down.

Standing up quietly so that I wouldn't wake the others, I made my way outside.

It was night on the plateau. Slowly but surely, the tranquil coolness made me feel at ease.

Or so I hoped, but that's not how it works – it usually creeps me out. For some reason, I almost squeaked in surprise just from hearing the owls hoot and leaves rustle.

As my heart throbbed violently, I surveyed my surroundings. Intuitively, I could make out a person's outline between the tree groves.

…whoa, was this a tree spirit…?

That sounded freakier than it should have. The correct term was "just my imagination", I guess. Let me just make it clear that you don't really call tree spirits 'dryads' in English. I have no clue whether dryad is an English word in the first place.

Within the cluster of trees stood a girl whose long hair reached towards the ground.

That scene in particular was divorced from reality, like I was looking at some kind of spirit or fairy. I had to be hallucinating.

When the moonlight shone gently upon her, her pale skin came clearly into view. When the breeze danced, her swaying hair danced along with it. As this fairylike girl bathed in the moonlight, she began to sing – softly, oh so softly. In the chilly darkness of the forest, her quiet singing voice felt unusually pleasant to my ears.

For my part, I merely gazed at the scene. If I took one step, I might destroy this world where only she existed. With that thought in my mind, I stood back and admired the music.

I wondered if I should go back…

I turned around slowly, meaning to retrace my footsteps. But as soon as I put my foot down, I accidentally trod on a small branch, causing it to snap.

The singing came to an abrupt halt.

"…"

"…"

One, two, three seconds passed – the bare minimum amount of time for us to recognise each other's presences.

"…who is it?"

The voice was that of an ordinary girl – Yukinoshita Yukino. If you meow like a cat, you might react like, "Oh, is that a cat…?" But in Yukinoshita's case she seemed more likely to say something like, "Oh, is that small fry…?"

I gave up and showed my face in front of Yukinoshita.

"…it's me."

There was a pause.

"Who is it?"

"Why'd you ask the same question as before? We're kinda acquaintances."

So stop tilting your head, damn it. The fact that her face was cute pissed me off way more than it should have.

"What are you doing out here at this hour? You ought to be having your eternal sleep."

"Could you stop announcing my death oh so nicely?"

Yukinoshita averted her eyes, which all but declared how little interest she had in me, or anyone else for that matter. Instead, she chose to gaze up at the sky. When I followed her eyes and looked up, the entire sky was twinkling with stars.

"Were you stargazing?"

Compared to the city, you could really see the stars clearly from every inch of this place. They were shining brilliantly, corresponding to the lack of lights everywhere else. When you think about the implications, I don't doubt that loners will shine away from other people. Crap, my future was too bright.

"That's not quite what I was doing."

What, did that mean she was at the mercy of the sky[42]? Or how about heaven's lost property[43]?

Yukinoshita let slip a sort of gloomy sigh. "I had something of a run-in with Miura-san…" Her face was downcast, looking rather depressed.

Oh, how rare for her to be the one to lose face. Just what you'd expect from Miura – she wasn't the Fiery Queen just for show.

"I demolished her argument in half an hour and made her cry. I did something very unbecoming…"

---

[42] "At the mercy of the sky" is the English translation of *Sora no Manimani*, which is the title of a manga.

[43] Another manga title drop, this time to *Sora no Otoshimono.*

The Icy Queen was too strong. She had no need for show. She was the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, seriously[44]. "So naturally, you ended up feeling bad and came out here."

"Indeed. I never thought for a moment that she'd cry… Yuigahama-san is comforting her as we speak."

I caught a glimpse of self-reflection. Perhaps even the great Yukinoshita was weak to tears. Wow, next time I should stop caring what other people think and just bawl my eyes out. Not a good look.

Yukinoshita smoothed down her hair, as if to signal she was changing the topic. "That girl… we need to do something about her."

"You're really going out of your way for a girl you don't even know."

"We've been doing things solely for people we don't know this whole time. I don't extend a helping hand to people I know through association. Besides… don't you think she resembles Yuigahama-san somewhat?"

"You think so?"

I never thought that way at all. In fact, there was someone right here who resembled her far more. Yukinoshita looked up at me with an ever so slightly lonesome expression on her face.

[44] This is apparently what Oda Nobunaga, a warlord infamous for his brutality, called himself.

“I think… Yuigahama-san might have gone through something like this before.”

Ah, if she put it that way, then I could understand.

Yuigahama was undoubtedly embroiled in our classroom politics. I don’t want to think too hard about it, but… I’m sure she had played along with the others once or twice.

And because of that, she knew. She knew that feeling of guilt. Yuigahama’s kindness was not that of an affectionate mother. She acted that way because she was so keenly aware that she was a disgusting, cruel and cowardly person at heart. Even so, she extended a firm hand in kindness without ever turning her eyes away.

“Also…” Casting her eyes downwards, Yukinoshita kicked a pebble near her feet lightly with her toes. “I doubt Hayama-kun will ever get his mind off it,” she said at length.

“Yeah, he does have his mind on it, I guess.”

He had a leader’s disposition in that sense. You could say his was the tale of a leader in the end of the century[45]. He might have a hero’s disposition. I wondered if he was raised on Shonen Jump manga. Nothing like my pampered upbringing.

“That’s not it…” Yukinoshita said uncertainly.

As soon as she spoke, her words were swallowed by the sounds of the forest, leaving silence in their wake.

“Hey, did something happen with you and Hayama?”

You could say that Yukinoshita had a sharp attitude towards Hayama or that she treated him coldly. I could sense that the first time Hayama came into the clubroom. During this training camp, her attitude had become even more striking.

When I voiced my question out of slight curiosity, Yukinoshita answered perfectly evenly as if it was nothing. “We went to the same elementary school, that’s all. Our parents know each other as well. His father is the legal advisor for our company. His mother’s a doctor, by the way.”

So the pretty boy riajuu from an elite family, an all-round sportsman with top-notch grades, also had a beautiful girl as his childhood friend.

Hmph... it was hard to find the right words, but I wasn’t about to roll over for him.

All I had was a reasonably nice face, a talent for literature, a loathing for team sports and the cutest little sister in the world. *All right, we’re on par!* Time for him to taste defeat.

If it turned out this guy even had a little sister, then I’d be screwed… it would be my crushing defeat.

“Still, dealing with family friends sounds like a pain as well.”

“I suppose so.”

“You make it sound like it’s not your problem…”

“That’s because it’s my sister’s job to show up in those public situations I mentioned. I’m nothing but a stand-in.”

---

[45] Yet another translation of a manga title: *Seikimatsu Leader den Takeshi!*

Whoosh, the wind blew, causing the treetops to shake. In that silent night, the sound of the leaves amplified; it was like hearing a pin drop.

Even with all this noise, Yukinoshita's voice reached me.

"Even so… I'm glad I came here today. I thought it was impossible."

"Huh? Why?"

I looked at Yukinoshita, not grasping the meaning of what she was saying. But Yukinoshita gazed up at the starry night, unmoving. It was as if she had not said anything at all.

Yet still, I waited for Yukinoshita to say something.

The bugs chirped impatiently. Perhaps because it had gotten chillier as the night wore on, an autumnal wind blew through the air.

As if on cue, Yukinoshita turned her head my way. Although she had a slight smile on her face, she said nothing.

She would not answer the question I never asked. That was how the silence between us was born.

After a moment of this had passed, Yukinoshita stood up straight. "We should be heading back now."

"…oh, right. See ya later."

"Indeed. Good night."

In the end, I never asked anything more than that. I don't make a habit of pushing questions about things I don't want to talk about. I figured we'd be better off not knowing too much about each other, maintaining a comfortable relationship of our own fabrication.

Yukinoshita walked the unlit path with confident steps. I watched her promptly disappear into the darkness.

Now that I was the only one left, I gazed up sharply at the night sky, the same one Yukinoshita Yukino had been gazing at.

I've heard that starlight is a relic of a distant past. Because starlight reaches out from the past, it transcends many months and years. The light from those bygone days leaps out at us.

Everyone is a slave to their past. No matter how much you wish to move forward, the events of yester year will bear down on you like the light of the stars as soon as you glance up. Unable to laugh or to banish your past, you carry it ceaselessly in a corner of your heart, waiting for it to resurrect at an inopportune moment.

That's how it was for Yuigahama, for Hayama – and, probably – for Yukinoshita.

Chapter 6: By Mistake, Hikigaya Hachiman Has No Swimsuit

I had a dream.

A soft and tiny hand shook my body with exquisite care. Through the dim haze of my sleepy stupor, I could feel the warmth of a body against my skin. A sweet voice was calling out my name, sounding ever so slightly anxious.

In my mind, it was a very happy dream.

But I knew it was only a dream. My sister normally never woke me, and even my parents were far more likely to leave the house before I opened an eyelid. Invariably, what shook me from my dreams was my inhuman and merciless cell phone alarm.

Therefore, my heart and body came to the joint conclusion that this was a dream.

"Hachiman, it's morning. Wake up…" the voice said over and over.

Since my body was getting shaken around so much, my eyelids finally wavered open. The morning light was blinding. Totsuka was beaming at me through the light, his smile somewhat perplexed.

"You're finally awake… good morning, Hachiman."

There was a long pause.

"Yeah," I answered finally.

This scene was so unreal that it left me dazed. White sunlight streamed through the window, and the sparrows and skylarks chirped outside.

"Huh…"

Could this be one of those morning-after scenes?! Had I crossed the horizon in the middle of nowhere, the one which must not be crossed[46]?!

As I fumbled in disarray, Totsuka peeled off the bed covers and started folding them.

"You won't make it in time for breakfast if you don't hurry."

As I received more information, I began to comprehend the situation. Right, so I had come to a training camp. And here I was wondering just when we had started cohabitating.

Once I wriggled out of bed, I followed Totsuka's lead and folded the mattress. "What about the others?"

"Hayama-kun and Tobe-kun went on ahead. You didn't look like you were gonna wake up anytime soon, Hachiman…" He looked at me with somewhat reproachful eyes.

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[46] Horizon in the middle of nowhere = *Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon*, a light novel series.

What was this feeling of guilt coming over me…? I've never apologised like a humble Japanese citizen over being late for school or work or something, but just this once, I was all *GEISHA HARA-KIRI MOUNT FUJI* over it. I mean, you can't say 'geisha' without 'gay', after all.

"My bad…" I apologised frankly, having now reflected deeply upon my actions.

But Totsuka was still pouting. "You know, Hachiman, your schedule's really out of whack during summer vacation."

"Y-yeah. Er, I guess."

"You don't exercise or anything."

"Yeah, that's right. I don't really get the urge. It's hot, after all."

"Isn't that bad for your body? You should do some kind of sp- oh, I know. Let's play tennis sometime," Totsuka suggested brightly.

"Oh, you wanna do that, huh? Call me when you get around to it." I blurted out the stereotypical line people always say when they're invited to things. When you exist on the fringe of society, I guess people end up asking you just to be polite.

It's like, "Oh… we're going?" Man, I really wish they wouldn't do that. I don't need it. When they ask, I end up making some half-hearted response just to be polite as well.

Just a bit of trivia: Guys who say "call me when you get around to it" when they get invited to stuff pretty much never get invited again. Source: me.

I looked at Totsuka impatiently, waiting for that law to take effect.

"Okay, you said it! I'll definitely call you!"

But this time, it seemed I was in the clear. Totsuka's cheerful response brought me to ease.

I couldn't find any particular reason to categorically refuse an invitation from a boy. I mean, if I got a call from Zaimokuza with some kind of plans, that'd be a different story. But besides doing stuff for Komachi, my plans were pretty much nonexistent. My schedule was so free I'd wipe the floor if there were ever a "How Much Free Time Do You Have?" championship. I seldom ever got invited anywhere, and I most certainly never invited anyone to hang out with me except me, myself and I.

I vowed never to ask anyone to hang out with me ever since that time in middle school when Ooiso-kun turned me down over the phone saying he had chores to do at home, but then when I went to the arcade by myself, I spotted him and Ninomiya-kun at the karaoke joint next door. I mean, you know how it is. Turning other people down hurts as well. That's my way of being nice, you see.

"Right, shall we go eat, then?" I asked.

"Sure. Er, uh… I don't know your mail address, Hachiman…"

Oh, right. It slipped my mind since I'd been using my cell phone as a time-waster and an alarm clock, but Totsuka and I still hadn't exchanged mail addresses.

So I could now finally obtain Totsuka's mail address, huh…? With a rush of feelings, I took out my phone and instantly accessed the register screen.

“Huh?! H-Hachiman, why are you crying?!”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just a yawn.”

It seemed I’d been moved to tears.

“Oh, right. You only just got up. Okay, tell me your address.”

“Here.” I showed him my address.

“Er, uh…”

Totsuka held up my phone against his and punched in the letters one at a time, as if he wasn’t particularly adept with machines. I was slightly worried about how he muttered things like, “Oh, huh? Is this right? Like this?” from time to time as he pressed away. If he made a mistake recording my address and his texts didn’t reach me, there would be no end to my sorrow.

“Okay, done… I think. I’ll send you a test message,” Totsuka said as he once again started pressing away at his phone at an agonisingly slow pace. In the meantime, he tilted his head and then nodded once he’d thought it through a little. “I sent it.”

“Ohh, thanks.”

A few seconds after he said that to me, my phone beeped.

Achievement unlocked: Totsuka’s address[47]! (High five!)

Man, this was great. *Now all I need to do is save his number,* I thought as I opened the incoming text.

Subject: hi this is saika

Body: hachiman, good morning. this is my first text. lets be even better friends from now on!

As soon as my eyes fell on that string of letters, something incredible happened to my heart. Without any warning, I fell into a violent coughing fit.

“Hkkkkk! Gaaaaaah!”

“Hachiman?! W-what’s wrong?! Are you okay?!” Totsuka started thumping my back in a frenzy.

Waah, even though his hand was so small, it felt so soft and warm…

“I-I’m okay now…”

“That’s good to hear…”

Once I was finally back on my feet, Totsuka gazed at me as if he wasn’t quite convinced by what I said. In order to distract him, I smiled at him brightly. “Okay, *now* let’s have breakfast.”

“Oh, okay.”

I pushed Totsuka’s back to urge him on as I walked along.

---

[47] The original reference is to a line from the Pokemon games. The message “Getto da ze!” comes up whenever you catch a Pokemon. I changed it to a Steam reference because that fits better than translating the line to “Totsuka’s address was caught!”

I'm quite sure he'd been thinking about the contents of his text when he tilted his head just before. Totsuka's literary talent was seriously impressive if he could make such a plain message drip with cuteness. Someone give him a medal.

Anyway, time to preserve this message for posterity. Also, time to set a specialised ring tone for whenever I receive a text from Totsuka and make a Totsuka-only folder too. I should put backups on my PC just in case.

xxxx

There was no longer any trace of elementary schoolers in the dining hall of the visitor house. Only Hiratsuka-sensei and the usual suspects were present.

"Good morning."

"Mm. Morning," Hiratsuka-sensei answered as she brought down her newspaper with a loud *thwack*.

Man, you don't come across a scene like that nowadays. I was gripped with nostalgia for the Showa era days[48].

When Totsuka and I sat down on a pair of empty seats, Yuigahama was right in our faces. "Oh, Hikki. Good morning!"

"Mmm."

Yuigahama gave me a generic "good morning". Somehow or other, I could tell "Yahallo" wasn't a morning greeting. Maybe you were supposed to use it after midday.

Yuigahama sat next to Yukinoshita, who sat next to Komachi. Komachi greeted us as well, only to spring to her feet and hurry off somewhere right afterwards.

As for Yukinoshita, she exchanged greetings with Totsuka before casting her eyes on me. "Good morning. So you woke up after all…"

"Hey, quit lowering your eyes like you're disappointed. Good morning," I responded with a stiff greeting. I got the feeling I ranked lower than slime in her eyes. What else is new?

Someone placed a tray before me with a clang.

"Hiii, sorry to keep you waiting. Here's one for Totsuka-san too!"

It seemed Komachi had gone to get breakfast for us. "Thank you."

I thanked her the way they do at McDonald's. Basically, the person serving you says, "Can I take your order?" and then "Would you like fries with that?" and then follows that up at the very end with a "Thank you". That ended up being a long-winded explanation.

"Th-thanks… okay, itadakimasu," Totsuka said.

Following his lead, I clapped my hands together. We weren't really doing a drill or anything – just the standard blessing before a meal. "Itadakimasu."

[48] The Showa era refers to the years between 1926 and 1989.

The breakfast was honestly very homely: white rice, miso soup, fried fish and salad, omelettes, natto, seaweed flavouring, spices, and orange for dessert. It pretty much matched my image of your standard hotel breakfast.

Eating in silence, I noticed instantly that there was a white rice deficiency. I calculated that the natto and seaweed flavouring alone took up two bowls. Plus, a raw egg took up a whole bowl the way they serve it in traditional inns, which totally sucked.

As I peered at my almost empty rice bowl, Komachi's voice called out to me. "Onii-chan, you want seconds?"

"Yes, please."

I passed over my bowl. For some reason, Yuigahama was the one who took it.

"I-I'll do it for you!" She started digging out rice from the wooden container with gusto, humming as if she thought this was all fun and games. "Here you go!"

Oh wow. She whipped me a mountain of rice that wouldn't look out of place in a Japanese folklore tale[49]. Well, whatever. I *was* thinking of eating another serving, so I wasn't complaining. "Thanks…"

With great solemnity, I let the bowl fall on my wrists and held it over my head in worship. Only then did I start eating a second time.

But (*surprise, surprise!*) this time the rice was damn good.

Now that everyone had eaten their fill of breakfast, I washed my meal down by sipping on some tea. Just like me, Totsuka gave his compliments to the chef and reached out for the tea at a somewhat languid pace.

As we were chatting away idly about stuff that happened yesterday and what would happen today, Hiratsuka-sensei started folding up her newspaper. "Now that breakfast is over and done with, let's talk about our plans for today."

She swallowed a mouthful of tea and continued.

"The elementary schoolers have free time for the day. The test of courage and camp fire are scheduled for tonight. I want you to prepare for that."

I sighed. "A camp fire, huh?" I scrunched up my face at that unpleasant phrase.

"Ah, that's when you do the folk dance," Yuigahama blurted out as if something had just occurred to her.

As soon as she heard that, Komachi's face lit up with a *ping*. "Ohh! You do the Bentora Bentora dance!"

"You mean the Oklahoma Mixer, I take it… but only the last syllable sounds the same," Yukinoshita said, not looking particularly surprised nor mortified at the error.

The whole Bentora Bentora thing is – *well*. It's what you do when you're communicating with space people at the park in the middle of the night – in other words, with aliens[50]. "They're not really that different. Your dance partner is pretty much an alien."

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[49] In the anime *Manga Nippon Mukashi Banashi* (Lit. 'Manga Japan Folklores Tales'), the characters are often shown eating really large servings of rice. Image reference here: http://portal.nifty.com/2012/12/12/a/img/pc/i002.jpg

[50] There's an example of this in the *Urusei Yatsura* manga: link

“Couldn’t you have said that in a nicer way, Hachiman…?” Totsuka said reprovingly.

But he was wrong. I had my reasons!

“Nah, I think that’s how it is.” I took a deep breath. “It starts off fine. But around the fourth time, the girl says, ‘We don’t really need to hold hands, ya know,” and then all the girls after that follow her lead and you end up doing an Air Oklahoma…”

“Hikigaya, your eyes are rotten… well, those eyes are perfect for the monster role. I’m counting on you for the test of courage preparations.”

“So does that mean our job is to scare the kids?”

Well, that was on the outdoor school’s itinerary. But still, having to stay in the forest at night was waaaay scarier.

“Yep. I mean, the course has already been decided and we’ve got a set of monster costumes ready. Well, you’d best give them a try beforehand. Now then, let’s get going and I’ll explain how we’ll go about the preparations.”

Hiratsuka-sensei stood up. We tidied up our tableware too and followed her outside.

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We picked up Hayama and the others on the way to the square.

It looked kind of like a sports oval, only a forest enclosed it instead of a fence. Something resembling a tool shed was situated at the very edge of the perimeter.

Once Hiratsuka-sensei gave the boys a lecture, we started preparing the camp fire. Totsuka and Tobe cut the firewood and brought it over. Hayama stacked the logs, while I arranged it in a shape like a well.

“Stacking logs alone in silence like this is kinda like Jenga,” I remarked.

“Huh? You can play Jenga alone?” Hayama asked me with a straight face.

Wait, you can’t? I thought for sure it was in the same category as card towers…

As for the girls, they were drawing a white line around the heart of the camp fire. This line would be used for the folk dance.

We cut firewood, gathered it and stacked it. Sure, the preparations themselves were done in no time, but since it was all physical labour under the sun, it was quite taxing on us.

I wiped my dripping sweat. “This heat is killing me.”

“Totally…”

Hayama and I spoke up as if we were both a little fed up with it.

“Good job.” Hiratsuka-sensei, who had come to observe our work in progress, passed us two juice cans.

Just as I was accepting her token of thanks-

“The others have already finished work. All you have to do is prepare for the test of courage in the evening. You’ve got free time now.”

Only Hayama and I remained, as if we were the last in line. Anyway, we were left to our own devices for now.

As I made my way back, I wracked my brains about what to do after this.

“I’m gonna return to my room for now, so what about you, Hikitani-kun?”

“Oh, me too…” I began, but then a thought occurred to me.

If I went back to my room like this, I’d have to go with Hayama. It wasn’t a big deal or anything, but I had this weirdly resistant reaction to him. To give you an example, it was like walking home from a class reunion in the same direction as some person you weren’t really friends with, which meant you had to force yourself to have an awkward conversation. In those situations, what did you need to do to avoid it? There was but one answer.

“Actually, there’s somewhere I want to drop by.”

In truth, there was nowhere I wanted to drop by. It was a tiny lie one uses to put off returning home. Some guys don’t read between the lines and are like, “Huh? Where are you going? I’ll come too!” but a discerning human being would choose not to pry. I figured Hayama was one of those discerning types of people.

“Right. Then I’ll be going that way,” Hayama said as he headed off into the distance, one hand raised.

I made some vague response and watched him go.

Now then, what to do…?

At this rate, I’d bump into Hayama if I returned to my room, so there’d be no point making all that song and dance about parting ways. Going somewhere to whittle away the time was probably the right option.

As I walked along with those idle thoughts going through my mind, my legs took me somewhere on a whim.

I heard the murmur of a trickling stream.

Oh right, I was sweating… the water around here was clean, and besides, no people lived upstream. The water was probably clear enough that I could wash my face in it.

Heading for the source of the noise, I walked along the path until I came across a small brook. It was about as small as a shallow ditch. It was probably a tributary. Basically, if I walked further downstream, I’d probably find a river. That would be perfect for washing for my face.

As I continued my pace, the thick, overgrown trees started to recede little by little. The sound of the water intensified, and the forest gave way to a conspicuously open space. This was the dry part of the river bed.

“Ohhh, this feels pretty nice,” I couldn’t help but mutter to myself approvingly.

The river might have been two metres wide, but the calm and gentle current didn’t even reach my thighs, and the current was gentle and calm. The water seemed perfect for a dip.

Gazing at the water’s brilliant reflection, I walked along the riverbed and-

“How coooold!”

“This feels great!”

In the quiet forest, I could hear high-pitched voices shouting in glee.

When I cast my eyes in that particular direction, Yuigahama and Komachi were frolicking in the river. Even from a distance, I could tell they were in swimsuits. What the hell were they up to…?

“Oh, onii-chan. Hey, hey! Over here!”

“…huh? Hikki?”

Komachi had caught sight of me as I was debating with myself about turning back. Now that she’d called me over and all, I had no choice but to comply. Actually, I really didn’t have any desire of doing that, not to mention I was a gentleman, so approaching girls in their swimsuits without their consent was against my principles, but now that I’d been called over there was really nothing for it – and, oh right, I had to wash my face and everything. Damn, there was nothing for it, so might as well go all the way!

“What’re you guys doing? And why are you wearing swimsuits?” I demanded, running up to them so hard I ended up panting.

Komachi cupped her hands and then-

“Down the sink she goes!”

A tsunami. My head was absolutely drenched, leaving the tips of my hair dripping.

…it was freezing.

All of a sudden, the anticipation inside me came crashing down to a record low. *Damn it, don’t say stuff you’d normally restrict to the confines of your private toilet…*

For a moment, I glared at Komachi through glazed eyes, but my little sister showed no sign of remorse. “It felt hot doing those preparations, so we took a dip” was her nonchalant answer to my previous question.

“As for the swimsuits, Hiratsuka-sensei said we could play around in the river… wait, why are you here, Hikki?” Yuigahama answered my question with a question, cowering behind Komachi as if she was embarrassed about her swimsuit.

“Er, I just came to wash my fa-”

“Who cares?” Komachi cut in halfway through what I was saying. “Look, look, onii-chan! Check out my new swimsuit!”

With a flourish, Komachi made this pose I really did not understand the point of.

The edges of her yellow bikini were adorned with frills, giving off a southern tropical flavour. As Komachi splashed the water cheerfully, I could see her swimsuit sparkling. What was this, Splash Star[51]? Once she’d finished pulling poses for the time being, Komachi stared at me.

“So what’s the verdict?”

I grunted. “Oh. Right. You’re the cutest in the world.”

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[51] A reference to *Futari wa Pretty Cure Splash Star,* a magical girl anime.

“Whoa, how half-assed.” Komachi was crushed.

I mean, come on, she had outfits like that at home…

Disgruntled at my reaction, Komachi let out a bored grunt, but then her eyes twinkled mischievously and she secretly prepared something behind her.

“Then… what about Yui-san?”

“Hey! Komachi-chan! Eek!”

With a sudden jerk, Komachi pulled out Yuigahama, who had been hiding behind her back. Unable to handle this sudden development, Yuigahama wobbled in front of me.

Vivid blue was the first thing that leaped out to me. She played with her hair shyly and smoothed over her bikini skirt. Her silky smooth skin matched her bikini’s vivid hue, reflecting the sunlight. Droplets of water slid off her glossy skin, remnants of her aquatic playtime just earlier. My eyes registered the elegant curves tracing her nape, stopped for a moment at the gap of her collarbone, before travelling to her ample bosom.

Well, damn. I just couldn’t take my eyes off her. Through nothing but sheer will, I somehow managed to tear my gaze away. Whenever I wilfully brought my eyes up, they naturally slid back down. So this was the Third Law of Phytits… thank you, based Bewbton-sensei.

“Er, um… uhhhh…” As she squirmed, Yuigahama’s face turned bright red and she turned her head away. But when I remained silent, her eyes flitted over to me uncertainly.

If she wanted my impressions or something, then this was awkward. The hell was up with this situation? I wanted to drop dead on the spot.

Calmly, I opened my mouth, choosing the safest, most innocuous words possible. “Well, uh, looks nice. Suits you.”

“Oh, okay… thanks.” Yuigahama smiled bashfully.

But I couldn’t quite bring myself to look her in the eyes. Since I could sense my face turning red, I knelt down at the water’s edge and scooped up some water. The clear, refreshingly cool water soothed my flushed skin.

As I scrubbed my face over and over, a familiar voice assailed me all of a sudden.

“Oh my, are you prostrating yourself in front of a river?”

“No way in hell. You pray towards the holy land five times a day…”

I looked up reflexively at those cold, biting words.

In that moment, I forgot to breathe.

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Just like her namesake, Yukinoshita Yukino appeared to me as snow personified.

Translucent white skin; long and beautiful legs that extended from her shapely calves to her hips; a surprisingly narrow waistline; and a modest yet still eye-catching bosom.

Yet within a moment, she hid that sight behind a pareo. That was close. I almost died from lack of oxygen just then.

"You said you're a practicing Buddhist, didn't you?"

"Oh, yeah…"

Right, I'm a Buddhist. Therefore, I wouldn't lose to this level of seduction. Don't underestimate an ascetic monk. Still, I wonder how Buddha managed to have children.

"What's this? You came too, Hikigaya?" Someone tapped my shoulder.

When I turned around, Hiratsuka-sensei was in front of me. Miura and Ebina-san tagged along behind her.

Hiratsuka-sensei was clad in a bewitching white bikini, displaying her long legs and ample chest for all the world to see. With her supple limbs and well-shaped navel, you could see she gave off a rough, athletic sort of appeal.

"Way to go, Hiratsuka-sensei! You could actually pass for someone around thirty!"

"…I'm still a shining beacon of someone around thirty. Suck it up and deal with it. I'll splatter your guts[52]!"

"Gaaah!"

My knees buckled from an earth-shattering punch in the stomach. That's not what *suck it up and deal with it* meant. As I moaned in agony, Miura and Ebina-san walked right past me.

Miura was wearing a fluorescent-purple bikini made of lamé. Her eyes were flashing and her figure was close to pitch-perfect, befitting of a queen. It probably took a lot of effort to become such a rare beauty, I'd imagine. She took confident steps, built upon the foundations of her hard work. Her pride magnified her charm even further.

Ebina-san, on the other hand, was wearing a competitive swimsuit of all things. The navy blue swimsuit, designed for efficiency, suited Ebina-san's slim body and somewhat graceful curves. The shoulder cord that crossed her back emphasised the beauty of her shoulder blades.

As she passed Yukinoshita, Miura glanced sideways at Yukinoshita's chest. Her entire face lit up with a smile.

"Heh, I won…"

Her voice held something resembling excitement.

At that, Yukinoshita's expression became rather puzzled. "Hm? What was that?"

Yukinoshita didn't seem to have any idea why Miura smiled, but I could take a wild guess. "Oh, ohh. I see now…"

At times like these I was probably supposed to clap her on the shoulder and offer her encouragement, but, well, I was kind of nervous about touching her bare shoulder. I mean, my hand might start sweating.

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[52] This is the catchphrase of Tokiko, the heroine from the manga *Busou Renkin.*

“Well, see, considering what your sister’s like, I reckon you’re just a late bloomer,” I said.

“Nee-san? What does Nee-san have to do with it?” Yukinoshita frowned.

At that point, Komachi cut in. “Yukino-san, it’s okay!” She gave her the thumbs up. “That doesn’t determine a girl’s value – there’s the personal element! I’m on your side, Yukino-san!”

“Uh-huh… thank you very much…” Yukinoshita thanked her somewhat shyly, even as she remained perplexed. But once she calmed down, she started intoning, “Nee-san, late bloomer, value, personal element…” in a quiet tone, as if the repetition would stretch her thinking.

“…ah.”

Boom!

A white hot glare pierced me. I looked away in a panic. *Help me, mummy, I’m scared!*

Also, why was she glaring at *me*? Miura was the one who said it!

“I’ll have you know it really doesn’t bother me in the slightest, but one shouldn’t determine a person’s victory or loss by such superficial traits, and if you were to insist on judging a person by their cover, then you ought to do it tête-à-tête and take the entire body balance into account as most people do it. That’s why, far from bothering me, it’s really a matter of who the true victor is here,” Yukinoshita said vehemently. A faint blush came over her cheeks, perhaps due to her fury.

Hiratsuka-sensei clapped her shoulder. “Yukinoshita, it’s not yet time to give up.”

Yuigahama joined in with a shower of praise. “You’re super pretty, Yukinon, so don’t let it get to you!”

“I believe I said it wasn’t getting to me…”

Yukinoshita remained aloof and detached even when the two of them attempted to console her, but she still kept glancing at Hiratsuka-sensei’s and Yuigahama’s breasts. “I’m not bothered over it,” she muttered feebly, letting out an almost inaudible sigh.

This had the look and feel of a pity party for one Yukinoshita Yukino. In an attempt to cheer her up, the girls entered the river and started splashing around.

A number of people made their overdue appearances there.

“Yo man, get hyped!”

“Oh, Hikitani-kun, you came.”

I grunted. “Yeah, I sorta ended up here.”

Hayama and Tobe were in swimsuits. They were, you know, normal swimsuits. *Nothing much to see here,* I thought, about to look away. At that moment, I noticed Totsuka standing behind the two of them.

Totsuka sprang out in front of me. “Hachiman, don’t you have a swimsuit?”

“T-Totsuka!”

He was absolutely radiant, from his small tiptoes, ankles, calves and thighs, to his pale skin. His white parker seemed slightly too big for him. Thanks to its size and blinding whiteness, it looked like he was wearing a white shirt over his naked body – *hot damn*.

When I caught sight of him clenching his slender hands underneath his three-quarter sleeves, my heart clenched too.

The clothes maketh the man. And yet his charm was further accentuated by what remained hidden.

“What’s wrong?”

Sometimes, denseness was a crime. When he tilted his head so cutely in that outfit, my heart beat several times faster.

"Er, that jacket…"

"Oh, this? It's because my skin's kinda weak. I can't let my body get too cold," he said as he drew the shirt against his chest.

Oh no, I couldn't *not* look.

"I-I see… best not to get a cold when you're enjoying your free time."

"Yep, thanks!" Totsuka said as he sprinted off towards the river.

When I looked around, everyone had already started playing in the water.

The girls seemed to be having fun splashing water at each other and squealing. They were also latching onto some dolphin-shaped pool toy they'd procured out of nowhere.

The boys were intent on catching fish with their bare hands – something you might do in a training arc.

As for me, I didn't bring a swimsuit… I wanted to splash water on Totsuka too…

When it came to swimming gear, I only had the trunks I used for swimming classes in middle school. I never planned to go out during summertime, so I didn't buy another pair once I'd graduated.

Not that I languished in regret. Since I had nothing to do, I decided to take refuge under a tree for now. A cool wind blew, as if ushered by the murmur of the stream. The sunlight filtering through the trees felt pleasant against my skin.

Normally, you'd end up twiddling your thumbs in a situation like this, but when I was with my classmates, everything I did amounted to killing time.

Exhibit A: bird watching.

Various birds had been chirping and flying around for a while now, indicating that this was a prime spot for bird watching. Yes, they were flying around, but since I was hardly an expert on birds, my bird watching ended in failure. Damn noisy birds.

Exhibit B: marbles.

You shoot pebbles like a B-Daman, attempting to snipe your target[53]. By the third round my finger started to hurt so I quit. The rocks were too hard. Plus, I didn't possess the mental fortitude to take turns with myself.

Exhibit C: insect watching.

I wonder why ants are so black and humongous in summertime. I get the feeling they're way stronger than ants in other seasons. Were they in season or something? Well, they tasted like crap, though. Source: me. Why did my elementary grade-schooler self eat ants and art tools, I wonder? Son, that's a marble you're holding! And that's an ant! Er, not that you're supposed to eat marbles either.

However, elementary schoolers are cruel creatures. For them, "playing with ants" equals "step on them OR flood their anthill OR set fire them on fire with a magnifying glass". Oh, and "playing with woodlice" equals

[53] A B-Daman is a popular marble shooting toy produced in Japan.

“make them curl up and use them in your airsoft gun OR turn them white by burning them with some handy fireworks”.

That’s why, well, no matter what you do, you end up being a blight to all existence.

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Since I got fed up with ant watching before long, I leaned against a tree and watched the others play around from a distance.

Yuigahama and Komachi did the most moving around, while Miura and Ebina-san seemed to be having fun standing about in their flashy swimsuits. If I had to put my finger on what Hiratsuka-sensei was doing, I suspected strongly that she was watching over the others, even if she did kick up huge waves while yelling, “Eat this!” from to time. Only Yukinoshita appeared unsure of how to react to all this merrymaking, judging from how she stood awkwardly a slight distance away.

It’s hard for a loner to understand this act of “making a fool of oneself”. After all, we loners don’t tend to hop on the bandwagon that easily. It’s not like I’m shy or anything. I just think about a lot of stuff so I can’t make a move easily, like *I don’t wanna be a bother* or *don’t wanna cause an accident* or *don’t wanna ruin the good mood by injecting myself into the picture*.

But Yuigahama didn’t seem to mind that stuff at all, judging from how eagerly she splashed Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita whipped around furiously, slicing through the water’s surface like a shuriken. She got a clean, solid hit at Yuigahama’s forehead.

As Yuigahama made a garbled noise, Komachi rushed to her aid, instantly turning the situation into a two-versus-one affair. But Yukinoshita, fully serious now, handled the handicap deftly.

Next, it was Miura’s turn to splash water on Yukinoshita like Continuous Energy Bullets, grinning all the while[54]. Even then, Yukinoshita’s movements were as sharp as you’d expect from her.

Hiratsuka-sensei appeared then, brandishing a water pistol and providing backup. Okay, using weapons had to be cheating…

Everyone else must have thought the same way, because even Ebina-san from the opposing side brought out a water pistol. Before you knew it, a free-for-all water battle had ensued. I hoped they wouldn’t get a cold.

As I watched how everyone was doing, I started nodding off, only to hear footsteps from the path close by.

When I looked at the source of the noise, I spotted a familiar girl. It was Tsurumi Rumi.

“Yo,” I called out to her.

Rumi nodded curtly.

She remained like that as she sat next to me.

Together, without saying a word, we watched everyone else play in the river.

[54] This is one of the moves in *Dragon Ball Z.*

The silence continued for a while, but then Rumi spoke up as if she had gotten tired of waiting. “Hey, why are you by yourself?”

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit. And you?”

She hummed in vague interest. Then she said, “We have free time right now. I went back to my room once breakfast was over, but no one was there.”

O-ouch…

I’d dozed off in class once, and when I woke up no one was there. Like her, I wondered whether they were shutting me out purposely. No one had bothered to wake me when we changed classes, though, that was all.

Finding yourself alone all of a sudden is surprisingly, well, surprising. It’s surprising even when your classmates, whom you only think of as part of the background, vanish without warning.

I was just as perplexed as you’d be if you read the latest volume of a well-drawn manga and *bam*! No backgrounds.

Rumi and I gazed blankly at the river for a while.

That prompted Yuigahama to glance our way. After that, she whispered something to Yukinoshita, and just when I thought they’d struck up a conversation, the two of them went upstream. Picking up the towels placed on a nearby blue sheet and using them to wipe their bodies, they walked over to us.

As Yuigahama dried her slightly dripping hair with her towel, she squatted down in front of us.

“Um… do you want to play with us too, Rumi-chan?”

But Rumi shook her head stubbornly. On top of that, she wouldn’t even meet Yuigahama’s eyes.

“I-I see…” Yuigahama hung her head, her expression drooping.

Noticing that, Yukinoshita called out to her. “That’s what I told you.”

Well, refusing invitations as a first reflex is a loner’s safety net, after all. When you hardly ever get invited to things, you’re better off assuming there must be some ulterior motive if you suddenly get an invitation for some reason. What if you get invited to a mixer for the sole purpose of being the butt end of someone’s clever jokes?

Also, a common hypothetical answer is “I’ll go if I can make it”. About eighty per cent of the time you don’t end up going. Source: me.

Rumi turned to me, no doubt because she was scared of Yukinoshita. “Hey, you know, Hachiman.”

“You’re missing an honorific there…”

“Huh? Your name’s Hachiman, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point.” Totsuka was the only one who called me solely by my first name.

“Hachiman, are you still friends with anyone in elementary school?”

“Nope…” Far from being neglected, I never formed a connection to begin with. “Well, not like I really need ‘em, I reckon. Pretty much everyone’s like that. Best to leave them alone. You won’t meet up with a single one of them after they graduate.”

“Th-that’s only how it is for you, Hikki!” Yuigahama insisted.

“I’ve never met up with anyone either,” Yukinoshita said without batting an eyelid.

Yuigahama sighed in resignation and then turned to Rumi. “Rumi-chan, these two are just special cases, you know?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a special case. In French, you’d say that’s *unique*. That sounds pretty flattering if you ask me.”

“In Japanese, you’d say *weird*…”

Yukinoshita regarded me with admiration for some reason. The word *unique* has other meanings, but as far as loners are concerned, *unique* has a nice ring to it.

Rumi peered at our exchange with a mystified expression. It seemed she still hadn’t accepted our logic. In that case, time to add more fuel to the fire.

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“Yuigahama, how many classmates from elementary school do you still meet to this day?” I asked.

Yuigahama pressed her index finger against her chin and looked up at the sky. “It depends on how often and what we’re meeting for, but… if it’s just to hang out, two or three people, I guess?”

“And how many people were in your grade, may I ask?”

“There were three classes with thirty people in them.”

“Ninety people, huh. From that, we can see that the probability of remaining friends five years after graduation is three-to-six per cent. This is Yuigahama we’re talking about, and she’s pretty much everybody’s friend.”

“You think I’m pretty…” Yuigahama giggled, blushing bright red.

“He’s not exactly praising you, Yuigahama-san.” Yukinoshita pulled Yuigahama, who had momentarily gone off into fairyland, back into reality.

I decided to leave them alone.

“In the case of your average Joe, you’re not everybody’s friend, so you divide the number by four,” I continued. “Er…”

“Between 0.75 and 1.5 per cent. Why don’t you redo elementary school?” Yukinoshita answered promptly as I agonised over the mental sum. What was she, Computer Obaachan[55]?

Also, even if I did redo elementary school, I’m pretty sure I’d end up treading the same path.

[55] Computer Obaachan is a popular children’s song. The song is about a grandma who can do anything.

“Now then, when you tally it up it’s around one per cent. The probability of remaining friends five years after graduating elementary school is one per cent. That’s a calculation error, I say. Therefore, you can get rid of it. You know how to round numbers, don’t you? Even though the difference between four and five is just one, four always gets scrapped. Think about Four-chan’s feelings for a change. When you think about it from Four-chan’s perspective, it’s natural that one person shouldn’t matter. Right, that concludes my proof.”

It was the perfect conclusion. But Yukinoshita facepalmed. “This young man made up some proof out of his totally unfounded assumptions. That was a blight on mathematics…”

“Even an elementary schooler like me could tell that was all wrong…” said Rumi.

“Oooh you must be ri- er, um, no! That was all weird!” Yuigahama almost believed me there for a second. Just what you’d expect from someone in the literature department.

Well, not like I wanted this to be a fun arithmetic class. “Who cares about the numbers? The point is that it’s a matter of perspective.”

“Your proof earlier sounded suspiciously like nonsense, but only your conclusions appear sound… what a riddle…” Yukinoshita’s expression was torn between disgust and admiration.

“Hmm… I don’t really agree, though. I mean, it takes a load off your mind if you’re happy with the one per cent. Getting along with everyone can really tire you out, after all.” Yuigahama’s voice was laced with genuine feeling. Turning to Rumi, Yuigahama smiled encouragingly. “So if you just think positive, Rumi-chan…”

Rumi smiled weakly in return as she gripped her digital camera. “Yeah… but my mum doesn’t get it. She’s always asking me how I’m getting along with my friends. She said, ‘Take lots of photos at the outdoor ed camp!’ and so this camera…”

That was why she bought the camera, huh. Well, it made sense to create memories to last a lifetime out of a school trip or some event like that. It wasn’t so strange to get fired up and be on the lookout for opportunities.

“I see… she’s a nice mum. She worries about you, Rumi-chan,” Yuigahama said with relief.

But Yukinoshita’s unpleasantly cold voice immediately followed. “I wonder about that… is that not a sign she wants to manipulate you, put you under her control and own you?” Her words stirred up uneasiness, the sort of feeling you’d get from treading on thin ice.

Yuigahama was unable to hide her astonishment, as if she had been slapped on the cheek. “Huh…? N-no way is that true! Plus… the way you talk is kinda-”

“Yukinoshita,” I broke in. “You’re right – that kind of thing does happen. Mothers make you do unnecessary stuff, and yeah, it’s like work. She told me off ‘cos I was in my room during Christmas, cleaned my room without asking and sorted my bookshelf. She wouldn’t control you if she didn’t love you.”

Right, so putting my porn magazines neatly on my desk was her way of loving me too. And giving me the silent death glare when I sat down at my usual seat for dinner after that also counted as her way of loving me. Maybe. If I didn’t believe that, my spirit would crumble.

When I said my piece, Yukinoshita chewed her lip tightly and looked down. Her gaze was pointed at the space between us and her.

“Yes, you’re right. That’s normally how it is.” When she raised her head once again, her expression was somewhat softer than usual. Yukinoshita turned to Rumi and bowed her head. “I’m terribly sorry. I was wrong, it seems. I spoke out of turn.”

“Ah, not at all… this is kinda hard and I don’t really get it,” a flustered Rumi replied, bewildered at Yukinoshita’s sudden apology.

Wasn’t this my first time seeing that chick apologise properly? Yuigahama’s eyes had widened as well. All of a sudden, things became still as death, and even Rumi seemed uncomfortable.

“Weeeell, you know how it is,” I said. “In that case, you wanna take a photo? Of me, I mean. It’s a super rare. You’d normally have to pay to get one.”

“Don’t need it,” Rumi answered promptly with a straight face.

“…oh, okay.” I deflated slightly.

But then her straight face unexpectedly crumpled at the seams.

“I wonder if all these bad things will change when I’m a high schooler…”

“At the very least, they most certainly won’t change if you intend to remain the way you are.” *Way to go, Yukinoshita-san! Not going easy on the young ‘un just after you finished apologising to her!*

“But it’s enough if the people around you change,” I remarked. “There’s no need to force yourself to hang out with others.”

“But things are hard on Rumi-chan right now and if we don’t do something about it…” Yuigahama looked at Rumi with eyes full of concern.

In response, Rumi winced slightly. “Hard, you say… I don’t like that. It makes me sound pathetic. It makes me feel inferior for being left out.”

“Oh,” said Yuigahama.

“I don’t like it, you know. But there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Why?” Yukinoshita questioned her.

Rumi seemed to have some trouble speaking, but she still managed to form the right words. “I… got abandoned. I can’t get along with them anymore. Even if I did, I don’t know when it’ll start again. If the same thing were to happen, I guess I’m better off this way. I just-” She swallowed. “-don’t wanna be pathetic…”

Oh. I get it.

This girl was fed up. Of herself and of her surroundings.

If you change yourself, your world will change, they say, but that’s a load of crap.

When people already have an impression of you, it’s not easy to change your pre-existing relationships by adding something to the mix. When people evaluate each other, it’s not an addition or subtraction formula. They only perceive you through their preconceived notions.

The truth is that people don't see you as who you truly are. They only see what they want to see, the reality that they yearn for.

If some disgusting guy on the low end of the caste works his arse off on something, the higher ones just snicker and say, "What's he trying so hard for?" and that would be the end of it. If you stand out for the wrong reasons, you would just be fodder for criticism. That would be the case in a perfect world, but for better or worse, that's how things work with middle schoolers.

Riajuu are sought for their actions as riajuu, loners are obligated to be loners, and otaku are forced to act like otaku. When the elites show their understanding of those beneath them, they are acknowledged for their open-mindedness and the depth of their benevolence, but the reverse is not tolerated.

Those are the fetid rules of the Kingdom of Children. It truly is a sad state of affairs.

You can't change the world, but you can change yourself. The hell was up with that? Adapting and conforming to a cruel and indifferent world you know you've already lost to – ultimately, that's what a slave does. Wrapping it up in pretty words and deceiving even yourself is the highest form of falsehood.

Something very much like anger boiled and seethed deep within me.

"You don't wanna be pathetic?" I asked.

"…yeah." Rumi nodded, fighting to contain a hoarse sob. Even now, tears threatened to fall; it must have been painful for her.

"…I hope the test of courage will be fun," I told her as I stood up.

My heart was already set.

I merely answered the question I asked myself.

Q. The world will not change. You can change yourself. Now then, how will you change?

A. Become the god of this new world.

Chapter 7: In the End, Tsurumi Rumi Chooses Her Own Path

No matter how you spun it, the test of courage was an outdoor camp event. It wasn't like we could use full-blown prosthetic makeup or VFX. As anyone would more or less remember, it's a simple affair: you set up Buddhist sutras, snuck around in the dead of the night to shake the trees and chased people around in headgear.

That being said, the forest at night was creepy in itself. Whenever the trees rustled, human voices not of this world tickled your ears, and when the wind blew, the dead stroked your cheek.

That was the sort of atmosphere we were embroiled in as we previewed the course for the test of courage, developing plans for the night as we did so. Once we inspected the course from top to bottom, we finished things off by sticking a bunch of straw paper talismans on a Stevenson screen that had been refashioned to resemble a shrine. The elementary schoolers were supposed to bring a talisman back.

Although a good amount of the work might have been done for us, we checked the dangerous spots so that the elementary schoolers wouldn't stray off the path and get lost. We put down coloured cones to mark where we would take up our monster roles; we'd simply walk back and forth to prevent the kids from passing through.

Although I never participated in the conversation, seeing as it was a conversation and all, I did map it out thoroughly in my head. *Mappy knows – this road is a dead end*[56].

When I returned to the standby area, Yukinoshita broke the ice.

"So then, what shall be done?"

What shall be done obviously had nothing to do with the test of courage.

She was asking how we were going to save Tsurumi Rumi from her fate. She received no answer from the others, who had been quite happy to share their opinions until now. Instead, silence fell upon them.

This was a hard matter to deal with.

Nothing would come of us simply chanting "you should all be nice to each other" like a mantra, and even if we did smooth the situation over by telling them what to do, history would repeat itself down the track. If, say, Hayama dragged Rumi into their inner circle, they'd look at her like she was a damned nuisance. Hayama was the popular one, and they all might get along for his sake. But it wasn't like Hayama could keep vigil around the clock for the rest of his days. We had to do something about the root of the problem.

All this time we had skirted around the obvious answer.

Hayama spoke up slowly and deliberately. "Rumi-chan might just have to talk with everyone, I guess. We'll make a situation where that can happen."

"But if you do that, the others might be horrible to Rumi-chan…" Yuigahama said with downcast eyes.

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[56] "Mappy knows" is a variation of the Japanese internet meme "Moppy knows". "Moppy" is the fan nickname for Houki, the main heroine of *Infinite Stratos*. The phrase "Moppy knows" is often attached to silly one-liners.

But Hayama still clung to his resolve. “Then they can talk to each other one at a time.”

“It’s the same thing. They might be nice to her face, but it’ll start again behind her back. Girls are scarier than you’ll ever realise, Hayato-kun,” Ebina-san said with a shiver.

As you’d expect, that shut Hayama up.

“What, seriously? That’s freaky!” For some reason, Miura had the jitters. Well, she was the type who spoke her mind. Since she’d always been the queen, maybe she was unconcerned with backstage politics, surprise though that may seem.

At any rate, being a riajuu was a pain. Perhaps it wasn’t a good idea to have friends; you had to share the bad stuff as well. No, in this case, they were offering up a scapegoat to preserve the status quo.

Only, the status quo in itself was a hotbed of problems.

That was what we had to do something about, then. “I have an idea.”

“Rejected.” Yukinoshita shut me down on the spot.

“You’re awfully quick to jump to conclusions… people like you aren’t cut out for buying a house or anything like that.” She’d be better off thinking things through a bit more carefully, in my opinion. “Anyway, listen up. This is the test of courage. We may as well make use of it.”

“How will we make use of it?” Totsuka tilted his head.

For Totsuka’s sake, I decided to cushion my explanation as much as humanly possible. “You know how they say anything can happen at a test of courage?”

That’s how I tried to put it, but everyone was nonplussed. Ebina-san was so suspicious I thought she was about to interrogate me.

Yuigahama, who was nodding along deep in thought, hit her hand as if she’d thought of something. “You get everyone’s heart thumping with the Spasibo Effect! Then they’ll get along, or something?”

“I think you meant the Placebo Effect,” Hayama said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. His eyes glinted with pity.

“…even before that, you’re talking about the Suspension Bridge Effect.” Yukinoshita lowered her eyes, looking rather saddened.

At some point, the atmosphere had become like a memorial service for Yuigahama Yui.

“I-I get it already! The gist is what’s important!” Yuigahama babbled, turning bright red in the face.

“The gist of it was wrong too,” I said. “Think about what often happens in tests of courage.”

“…dying of shock, I suppose. Indeed, no physical trace is left behind, so it can get explained away as an accident, I believe. I think going that far is inhuman.” Yukinoshita looked at me with reproachful eyes.

“Wrong. Your thought process is more inhuman…” With a cough, I presented my answer. “The correct answer is – bumping into delinquents when you’re trying to take a ghost photo and then getting chased around by them.”

“That doesn’t happen.” Hayama and Yukinoshita shut me down in unison.

“Shuddup, it totally happens.”

Indeed. See, the thing is, I was inspired by this rather unfortunate girl who was alone in saying, “I can sense spirits…” Thinking I’d be really cool if I could see spirits too, I went out to take a ghost photo.

But what I found was not a ghost but a bunch of delinquents. They bumped into me at the worst possible moment, right in the middle of their own test of courage.

I provoked their fury, all because I frightened them out of their wits, and then I got hounded by them and – well, let’s not get into that story.

Yukinoshita sighed in disgust. “You aren’t by any chance getting at some clichéd conclusion like human beings are the most frightening of all, are you?”

“Delinquents are pretty scary, though.” Komachi nodded sagely.

But-

“Not quite. Yeah, it’s not wrong to say that human beings are the most frightening of all, but that fear doesn’t take the form of delinquents.”

“Then what does it take exactly…?” Yukinoshita asked me.

I paused a moment before answering.

“The most frightening people are the ones close to you. Since you trust them with your life, you wouldn’t dream they’d stab you in the back. The things that scare you come out of nowhere. As they say, your worst enemy could be your best friend.”

I tried to put it in the plainest terms possible, but everyone was nonplussed.

“I’ll explain it in concrete terms.” It wasn’t such a hard idea to grasp. “People tend to show their true colours in dire situations. When they’re really afraid, they’ll do anything to save their own skins. They aren’t capable of thinking about other people. They’ll even sacrifice one of their own to save themselves. There’s no way you can get along with someone once their ugly side is revealed so starkly. That’s how we can tear them apart.”

I discussed the contents of my plan with an indifferent tone, but their reaction was another thing altogether. Everyone frowned and fell silent.

“If everyone becomes a loner, no one will ever fight.”

I chose those last words with deliberate care.

xxxx

“Wh-whoa…”

Yuigahama recoiled when I finished talking. Yukinoshita’s eyes narrowed as much as humanly possible, glaring at me almost through slits.

“Hikitani-kun, you have a nasty side to you…”

Even Hayama, who never said anything bad about anyone, was disgusted. It kind of made me want to cry. I hadn't felt like this since that time in elementary school when our class took care of animals, only for our crayfish to eat each other up, at which point I got blamed for it at the school level assembly.

Only Totsuka nodded eagerly in admiration. "Hachiman, you sure think about a lot of things."

If anyone else had said that, it would have sounded like sarcasm, but when Totsuka said it, I could swear he was praising me without reservations. If by any chance those words turned out to be false, I might just destroy the world as we know it.

Yukinoshita pondered for a while. "Nobody else has any ideas…" She trailed off. "In that case, we don't have much of a choice." She seemed to have come to a decision.

It was now or never. It wasn't like there was much else we could do.

But Hayama looked far from happy about it. "That won't solve the problem, will it?" he asked finally.

Indeed, it was like Hayama said. This was not the right answer. That it was wrong went without saying.

"But we can erase the problem."

When I lifted my head, Hayama was peering straight into my eyes. His gaze was so direct I looked away, flustered.

But he wasn't wrong.

If you're worrying about your relationships, then just destroy those relationships and your worries will disappear. Cut off the cycle of defeat at its root. That was fine. *I mustn't run away* is something only strong people think. It's wrong because that's what the world forces on you.

The words *"I'm not wrong – the world is"* might feel like an excuse, but they are certainly not off the mark. You can't possibly be wrong all the time. There are plenty of cases when your neighbours, society and the world at large are in the wrong.

If no one would attest to that, then I would.

Hayama stared straight at me. But then suddenly he broke out into a broad smile.

"So that's the way you think, huh… I understand a little why she'd look out for you."

Just as I was about to ask who *she* was referring to, Hayama immediately went on.

"Okay. We'll go with this… however, I'm betting that they'll band together and deal with the problem as a group. I want to believe that's their true nature when it comes down to it. I'm sure they're nice kids at heart."

In the face of Hayama's blindingly bright smile, I was lost for words. Even though we agreed on the same methods, just how deeply did our ideas clash?

"Huh? This totally sucks," said Miura.

"Damn," said Tobe. "I'm all out too."

Once Hayama pacified Miura and Tobe's bitter complaints, he turned back to me. "We'll go with Hikitani-kun's idea. You're the auteur here."

"…okay."

Even though Hayama's role would be an unpleasant one to play, he still insisted that he would do it.

In that case, I would have to brace myself too.

Also, what did auteur even mean? I wondered what I was supposed to do.

xxxx

As we were making preparations for the test of courage, Hiratsuka-sensei called us over to one of the rooms in the visitor's house.

"I got a request for you to act out a ghost story in order to build up anticipation for the test of courage," Hiratsuka-sensei said, announcing our next mission.

As far as tests of courage went, ghost stories were indispensable. If we could heighten the tension with a ghost story, even we would look like ghosts depending on how they scared they felt.

They say that "A ghost's true form is withered silver grass", but when people succumb to the emotion known as fear, they tend to hallucinate about strange and bizarre sights.

You could say that the ghost phenomenon is pretty much born from subjective impressions and misunderstandings. Basically, feeling that there's still corn in a corn potage can or seeing a bowl move after you've poured hot miso soup into it are also subjective interpretations. You misunderstand the nature of what you see. Nothing in this world is all that mysterious.

"Does anyone know any ghost stories?" Hiratsuka-sensei asked us.

We all exchanged glances.

Well, this wasn't exactly Storyteller Tamori, so it wasn't like we had a bunch of ghost stories ready at hand[57]. The only one to raise his hand besides me was Totsuka.

"Hmph. Totsuka and… Hikigaya, huh. A combination that only leaves me with fear. Tell us a little about your stories."

In order to set the scene for the test of courage, we'd be revealing our ghost story in front of two classes of thirty – that is, in front of sixty students. Naturally, we couldn't afford to tell a terribly dull story.

We'd borrowed a room in the visitor house and sat around in a circle. We'd even prepared candles to enhance the mood.

Totsuka and I agreed on the order to tell our stories just through eye contact. Once that was done, Totsuka raised his hand hesitantly, regardless of the silent exchange we had just shared.

"Okay, I'll go first…"

The lights in the room had already been extinguished, leaving only a few flickering candles to rely on as a light source. When a languid wind blew through the slightly open window, the candle lights flickered and their thin shadows warped out of proportion.

"This is a story about my senpai. My senpai was something of a street racer.

[57] Tamori is a Japanese celebrity who hosts the Japanese television show *Yonimo Kimyō na Monogatari* (Tales of the Unusual).

“One day, he challenged the mountain peak alone like he always did. But then he was stopped by a patrol car. He thought this was strange since he wasn’t going over the speed limit at the time. Then, the policewoman who got out of the patrol car spoke to him.

“‘It’s against the law for two people to ride without a helmet… huh? What happened to the girl riding behind you?’ she asked.

“Senpai always went alone; he never rode with anyone. So then… just what did the policewoman see…? And then the next day…”

Totsuka wiped the beads of sweat off his forehead and made a loud gulp.

“Senpai had a *dance* with *hard luck*.”

That was anticlimactic. What was with the Engrish? He read too much yankee manga [58]…

Everyone listening looked disappointed. But Totsuka went on talking. I had to admire his strength of will.

“That senpai is now the father of two children. He quit being a street racer and started working. Then he built a happy family after marrying the policewoman who stopped him that day. These days, his wife is scarier than a ghost.”

“Who’d want a heartwarming story like that…?” Hiratsuka-sensei said with disgust.

Heh, I couldn’t stand it if something like *that* gets called a ghost story. I’d teach these punks about true fear.

“Now it’s my turn.”

I brought my candle closer to me, letting it scrape against the ground. The flame’s shadow warped. I’d tell them a really scary story – believe it!

“This is a true story…”

As soon as I used that stereotypical opener, the whispering voices came to a halt. I could hear every breath they took.

“It happened in elementary school, when our school was having its outdoor ed camp. They decided to hold the yearly test of courage. Indeed… it was on a languid night exactly like this one.

“We were split into groups, tasked with bringing back a paper talisman from a small shrine in the heart of the forest. Things went smoothly until at last our number was called. But, well, they might call it a test of courage, but all the tricks were set up by the teachers. There weren’t any ghosts hanging around. The scarecrows and teachers with sheets over their head might have freaked us out, but we still managed to grab a talisman from the shrine and return safely.

“Nothing happened in the slightest, just a light-hearted event with a bit of screaming and yelling. Or so I thought. Then one of the members of our group, Yamashita-kun, suddenly spoke up.

“‘Did someone take this talisman?’

[58] The lines “hard luck” and “dance” refer to an iconic scene in the racing manga *Kaze Densetsu Bukkomi no Taku.* One of the characters has an accident on the track. The main character then says, “Guys who have ‘accidents’ had a *dance* with *hard luck*.” The words “dance” and “hard luck” are written with kanji, but are pronounced in English.

“Those words were enough to send our group into chaos. ‘Was it you?’ ‘No, it wasn’t me.’ ‘Me neither…’ ‘Then who was it?’ The people in my group said they couldn’t remember who took the talisman. I was deeply afraid, you know. I was quivering in my boots, on the verge of tears.

“After all…”

I trailed off.

All eyes were on me – no, not on me, but perhaps on the inky black darkness looming behind me.

“…no one noticed that I was the one who took it…”

As I ended my story, I blew out the candle.

In the deathly silence that had settled in the room, I heard Yuigahama sigh. “That’s just a loner thing.”

“It would be scarier if Hikigaya-kun actually got along with those he did the test of courage with.” Yukinoshita threw me a cold look as well.

She was right on the money, so I couldn’t exactly voice an objection.

“Good grief, is that the best you guys can come up with?” Hiratsuka-sensei let out a deep, deep sigh.

“Errr, what do you expect when you ask amateurs to tell a scary story out of the blue…?” I asked.

“Hmph… but it’s a widely sought skill among working adults. You get asked to ‘tell a funny story’ at drinking parties, after all. You don’t get the chance to polish your storytelling skills. It makes your working relationships run smoothly.”

That came as a shock to me. I-I had no idea…

“What’s that you say…? Since I’m a no-hoper and all, I’m better off not working. That’s the working environment I should have, right?”

“You’re too negative… I’ll show you how it’s done,” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she lit one of the candles.

The older, the wiser – that sort of thing. At long last, we would hear an adult’s ghost story. With expressions full of expectations (“She’ll tell us! An original story that’ll make us tremble!”) we turned to Hiratsuka-sensei.

Hiratsuka-sensei withstood our gazes with a fearless smile and then slowly began to recount her tale.

“I had someone you could say was my best friend. Let’s call her Kinoshita Haruka. But five years ago, Kinoshita Haruka went missing… all she said to me before she left was, ‘I’ll go on ahead’. Since then, I’ve never come across her…

“But something happened a few days ago. A familiar woman appeared before me. She had a weary expression and a thin smile on her face. It was my friend, who should have been missing. Just as I was about to call out to her, I caught sight of something behind her – a grinning face…”

As Hiratsuka-sensei spoke, her face turned pale. It seemed she was recalling her fear at that moment. Her ghastly expression sent shivers down our spines as well.

“…the child on her back was already three years old. That was really frightening.”

Hiratsuka-sensei blew out the candle in front of her and the room turned pitch black.

In the awkward silence that fell over the room, I couldn't suppress myself.

"All she did was change her name and have a kid…" I muttered inadvertently.

Someone take her already, for god's sake. Otherwise, I might just take her myself out of pity.

In the end, it looked like none of us were cut out for ghost stories, so we settled on screening the *School Ghost Stories* DVD in the visitor's house.

xxxx

While the elementary schoolers were engrossed in the DVD, the high schoolers steadily carried out the preparations for the test of courage.

As Yukinoshita and the others took care of the preparations, I got called over by Hayama for a meeting about the finer details. Once we confirmed the gist and main points, we got into the minute plans.

"We're better off just fixing up Rumi-chan's group, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, you're right. It's gonna take time, so you should leave them till last. Are you gonna pull off some trick when they draw the lots?"

"Nah, that's not realistic and it'll take too much time. We'll name the groups ourselves. Right… we'll explain it's supposed to heighten the thrill by not giving the students time to mentally prepare themselves."

The meeting with Hayama was progressing without a hitch. I thought I was pretty high in the brains department, but I could sense that Hayama was always one step ahead of me. What might have seemed like quibbling excuses felt fair and square out of his mouth, so it was all quite mysterious.

"Then I'll leave it to you," I said finally.

"Roger that. How will you lead them there?"

"I'll remove the coloured cones and make them go on the path that leads to the dead end. You and the others ought to lie in wait at the end there."

"Got it. Also, about Tobe and Yumiko, I doubt they'll remember such fine-tuned directions."

Ah, so it seemed they weren't too great at memorising things.

"You should put cue cards on their cellphones. It wouldn't feel out of place for them to be playing with their phones. In fact, it might even feel more real if they play with them lazily."

"I didn't think of that…"

Hayama ran his finger over his tablet and wrote something down in fine detail. That businesslike attitude of his was simply amazing.

In any case, it was nice to have a conversation about work. You don't have to pass time fishing for a topic, and there's no need to take the other person's feelings into consideration. It was nice to be forgiven for saying harsh things because that was all part of the work process.

"So like this, huh? I'll give Tobe and Yumiko directions."

"I'll leave it to you," I said, although I probably didn't even need to tell him that.

"All right, I'll see you later."

Once the meeting ended, I parted ways with Hayama, who went to talk with Miura and Tobe. At that point, I decided to help Yukinoshita and the others with the preparations.

I might call it preparations, but it wasn't exactly a full-blown affair. Basically, we just needed to walk around and frighten little kids.

In our case, instead of a detailed haunted house setting, game-like elements with a strong impact took precedence. With elementary schoolers in particular, the physical attractions would appeal to them way more than fleshing out a backstory. To put it simply, appearing out of the darkness and making them scream in surprise would be entertaining for them. Back when I was in elementary school, a Jason Voorhees came flying out of nowhere, Buddhist sutras were piled around a particular zone, and ghosts with sheets on their head staggered around aimlessly at the finish line – it was the very picture of chaos.

This facility, which hosted outdoor ed camps of the sort I just mentioned, held monster goods in reserve for these purposes. The teachers had taken it upon themselves to prepare the goods for us.

They'd prepared them all right, but I was left scratching my head when I saw some of the goods.

"An imp outfit… cat ears and tail… a white yukata… a witch's hat with a mantle and cloak… a miko outfit…"

Sure, they stood out, but wasn't there a limit to this sort of thing? This was bordering on Halloween.

According to Hiratsuka-sensei, an elementary school teacher had prepared the props this time. Yet no matter which angle you thought about it, you could only conclude he wanted to see high school girls in cosplay outfits. This was making me want to become a teacher too.

To start things off, Ebina-san took the miko outfit. Ebina-san, who had an innocent and pure look about her despite being in Miura's group, looked pretty good in a Japanese-style outfit. But she felt more enigmatic than frightening, I'd say. I wondered if she'd evoke an eerie feeling if she stationed herself at the shrine.

As I thought about each of our positions, I looked around at the others.

As soon as I did that, I caught sight of Totsuka adjusting the three-cornered hat on his head. He was pulling on the thread of his robe's sleeve. "I wonder if magicians count as monsters…" he muttered, sounding perplexed.

"Well, when you generalise grossly, yeah." Except that was a witch girl outfit no matter how you looked at it. *Sharanraaaan*[59].

"But it's not scary, is it?"

"Nah, it's scary. You're all good."

Yeah, it really was scary. At this rate, I might end up on the Totsuka route, so yeah, it was scary. *Heh… were you the one who cast the forbidden spell on me*[60]*?* What the hell was I saying?

"Onii-chan, onii-chan."

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[59] He's quoting the lyrics from the OP of the anime *Majokko Megu-chan* (lit. 'Little Meg the Witch Girl'.)

[60] He's quoting the lyrics from the J-pop song *Mahou wo Kaketa no wa Kimi* by Misia.

Someone tapped my shoulder – no, the sensation was a bit more muffled than a tap. When I looked over my shoulder, a cat's paw that looked like it belonged to a plush toy was beckoning to me eagerly.

"What's that – a monster cat?"

"I think so…"

I wondered if this was one of the Shiki Theatre Company's musicals [61]… until I realised it was my sister.

Komachi was wrapped up in fake black fur, sporting cat ears and a tail.

"I don't really get it, but it's cute so I don't care," I said.

A pretty girl would be cute no matter what clothes she wore. She'd probably even look cute in a mobile suit. Source: the Nobel Gundam from *G Gundam*.

As Komachi twitched and curled her humongous cat paws, attempting to investigate its movements, a ghost-like apparition appeared out of nowhere.

"…"

The ghost gently reached out for Komachi's cat ears.

Stroke, stroke.

"Er, um… Yukino-san?"

Pat, pat.

Yukinoshita went for the tail this time.

Twitch, twitch.

Then she nodded. What the hell? Just what kind of understanding did she achieve? Quit looking like someone reeling off their expert opinion. She looked like she was about to say *Good show, old chap*.

"You're fine, I believe," she said at length. "It looks quite nice on you."

"Thank you so very much. Yukino-san, you look super cool too! Right, onii-chan?"

"Yep. A kimono suits you ridiculously well. You're totally like a Yuki-onna[62]. How many people have you killed?"

"…is that your attempt at a compliment?" Yukinoshita's eyebrows arched abruptly. The sudden intensity made a chill run down my spine.

"Ah, that chilly air. You really are a Yuki-onna. You're a dead ringer."

As I gushed over her, Yukinoshita flicked her hair over her shoulder and looked right at me. "You're a dead ringer too, Hikigaya-kun. You make a fine zombie. Your rotten eyes are Hollywood-tier."

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[61] He's referring to *The Cat Who Wished to Be a Man,* a children's comic fantasy novel by Lloyd Alexander. It was turned into a popular musical in Japan.

[62] Yuki-onna are female spirits in Japanese folklore. They're usually portrayed as beautiful and serene, yet ruthless in killing humans who have ventured into the snow.

“I’m not wearing makeup or a costume, though.”

I glared at Yukinoshita with glazed eyes, but turned away on instinct when she glared back at me.

Now that I wasn’t looking at Yukinoshita, my eyes fell on Yuigahama, who was fidgeting in her imp outfit.

Just when I thought she was cracking a smile in front of the full-length mirror, she immediately shook her head fervently, as if thinking better of it. Then, just when I thought she let out a small sigh and hung her head, she struck a cheerful pose. She was like someone on the night before their first cosplay event.

“You look busy there,” I called out to her.

“Oh, Hikki…”

Yuigahama hugged herself in an attempt to conceal her body. Her lack of confidence had also spilled over to her facial expression.

I spoke up. “Um, you know-”

Her downcast eyes looked up furtively, anticipating my words. “Er, um… how do I look?”

“If you looked just slightly off, I’d have spelled it out and made fun of you… too bad I can’t do that.”

Er, what…? Yuigahama was puzzled for a while, but then she grimaced and chuckled as if she had figured out the meaning.

“You should just compliment me straight… mooooron.” Yuigahama flayed me cheerfully before turning back to the mirror in a better mood than before.

Komachi, who had probably seen the whole thing from start to finish, made an amused noise and smirked in satisfaction. “Onii-chan, you’re such a Hinedere[63].”

“Don’t make up weird new terms.”

As the feeling that this was all an indescribable waste of effort washed over me, Hayama’s group returned.

When I looked their way, Miura and Tobe had completed their preparations to a T. Miura in particularly was incredibly scary despite not wearing a costume. In other words, she was just scary all the time.

“Hayama.”

When I called out to Hayama, he nodded curtly and started speaking.

“Right, let’s start our last meeting.”

There was only a slight amount of time left until the test of courage began.

Even as they were perfectly aware that this would leave a bad aftertaste and that nothing good would come of it, nobody was able to stop it, and thus time marched on at its own pace.

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[63] This is a play on words with “tsundere” etc. “hine” means “twisted”.

Perhaps in an attempt to enhance the atmosphere, a bonfire was situated at the starting point. Whenever the live trees shifted, sparks would fly with a crackle.

"All riiiiight! Next up is this group!"

When Komachi pointed to a group, the kids squealed very excitedly. Once everyone in the group had gotten on their feet, kicking up a noise as they did so, they got in a line and headed for the starting point.

Thirty minutes had already passed since the test of courage began. When you counted the remaining numbers, you could see that about seventy per cent of the groups had departed.

As Hayama had suggested, the plan went along smoothly when we picked the groups right then and there without settling on a fixed order. The elementary schoolers, who were waiting around wondering when they'd be next, looked slightly nervous. For his part, Hayama let out a sigh of relief as he saw for himself that things were going as planned. Right after that, he whispered something in Miura and Tobe's ears. Perhaps they were having a meeting about the final step of the plan.

"When you start, please take a paper talisman from the small shrine deep in the forest." Totsuka announced the simple rules as he stood towards the entrance of the forest in his witch girl outfit. At first, he flubbed his lines, probably because he was nervous, but eventually he got used to it after sending out group after group. Now he was doing it quite consummately, as you can see.

It was probably fine to let Komachi and Totsuka take over from here. Besides, Hiratsuka-sensei was with them. There shouldn't be any major problems.

Furtively, I started making my move so that I could observe how the test of courage was going. *Time to see how the others were handling themselves*. I walked along the grove of trees for a while so that the elementary schoolers wouldn't detect my presence.

The first one in position was Yuigahama.

When the grade schoolers passed by, she sprang out from the tree's shadow.

"Rawr! I'll eat you up!"

…what was with her lame attempt at scaring them? Was she Gachapin[64]?

Hardly ruffled by the goofy teenage girl who had suddenly appeared, the elementary schoolers burst into laughter and scampered away.

Once the elementary schoolers were out of sight, Yuigahama let her shoulders sag and sniffed.

"Wow… it's like I'm the stupid one…"

Ouch…

Figuring I'd agitate her if I called out to her or something, I decided to leave her be for the time being. I made liberal use of shortcuts, cutting through the grove of trees, and then went on ahead.

Along the path, I could hear shouts from the elementary schoolers.

[64] A popular Japanese television character. He is a green, bucktoothed dinosaur. Think of him as the Japanese equivalent of Barney the Purple Dinosaur.

They were all talking at once and laughing about how dull it was and how it wasn't scary at all. I wondered if they weren't so scared after all. But when I made a rustling sound in the grass, their voices hushed immediately.

"What was that just now?" "I think I saw something." "It was nothing…" I could hear them say that sort of thing.

The most frightening thing of all is that which you cannot see. Without revealing myself, I hurried on to the next place.

Deep in the forest, it was dark, and that alone was enough to make my skin scrawl. It might have been summer, but nights on the plateau were chilly. Thanks to that, I couldn't tell if I was merely cold or if the cold sensation came from the presence of an unfamiliar being.

The path was illuminated by the fickle glow of the moonlight and starlight. As I went along, the path split in two.

A white figure loomed ahead. The moonlight shone through the gaps in the branches, revealing chalk white skin, while the wind caused the figure to sway like an illusion.

I couldn't muster any words.

It wasn't because I was afraid. I was so entranced by the vivid beauty before me that a shiver rolled down my spine. It felt wrong to come closer or to open my mouth, as if that beauty represented a line that must not be crossed.

I'm sure plenty of things in the world have been like that over the ages. As stories about them are handed down through the generations, they end up becoming supernatural figures. That random thought ran through my mind.

While Yukinoshita Yukino remained a ghost, I could only stand there in a trance. The clear moonlight and the cold, chilly wind brushed over my body.

Time stood still, even after several seconds had passed.

She turned around, having noticed someone's presence. Her eyes fell on me; I was in the shadow of the tree.

"Ahhhh!"

Surprised at my sudden appearance, Yukinoshita sprang back two whole metres.

"…Hikigaya-kun?"

Yukinoshita's eyes fluttered rapidly and then she smoothed down her chest in relief.

The hell was up with that reaction…? It was making me blush. "I see you've been hard at work."

"I thought you were a ghost… your eyes were zombified."

Man, that reaction was totally not cute. It was making me snort. "Didn't you say ghosts don't exist?"

"Indeed I did."

"You looked pretty scared just now, relatively speaking," I said.

Yukinoshita reacted indignantly. She glared at me casually and launched into a rambling speech.

“I was not afraid, not by any means. When you believe that sort of thing exists, your brain arbitrarily links the image to the visual cortex. From a medical perspective, it’s quite clear that one’s thoughts induce an effect over the body. Therefore, ghosts don’t exist. Or, to put it another way, they don’t exist when you don’t believe they exist. Most certainly.”

That reeked of an excuse… especially adding the “most certainly” part at the end there.

“In any case, I do wonder how long this will continue,” she remarked.

“About seventy per cent of them are done. It’ll be over soon.”

“…I see. We must remain here for a while yet,” she sighed stiffly.

At that moment, the grass rustled. Yukinoshita’s shoulders stiffened in reaction. So she really was scared, huh.

Oh, crap. The elementary schoolers had caught up to us. At this rate, they’d catch sight of me in the open. Just as I was about to hide in the tree’s shadow, something yanked me forcefully. When I turned around, Yukinoshita had caught hold of my sleeve.

“What do you want…?” I demanded.

“Huh? Oh…”

Yukinoshita must have acted unconsciously, because when she heard my question, she looked perplexed. Once she realised what she was doing, she let go of my sleeve like it was on fire and turned away hastily.

“…it’s nothing at all. More importantly, shouldn’t you hurry up and hide yourself?”

“Sorry. Seems we were a bit too late.”

Before I could move, the elementary schoolers turned onto path. The kid leading the way got an eyeful of me.

Bumping into a guy in casual clothes would ruin the spooky atmosphere. I wouldn’t want to spoil a test of courage.

Or so I thought, but the elementary schoolers’ eyes turned wide with horror.

“A z-zombie?!”

“No, it’s a ghoul!”

“I don’t like the look in his eyes! Let’s scram!”

The elementary schoolers scampered off as fast as they could. I looked up at the starry sky, half in tears.

Yukinoshita smiled widely and patted my shoulder. “Well done. You entertained the children. They’ll have wonderful memories thanks to your rotten eyes, won’t they now?”

“You have no idea how to comfort someone…” Why did this chick have to kick me while I was down? “Right, I’ll get going now.”

“All right. Until later.”

Leaving Yukinoshita behind, I pressed onwards. The elementary schoolers might have the head start, but I could take a shortcut if I slipped through the grove of trees.

Ignoring almost all the paths, I made my way for the bonfire situated at the goal point.

Near the shrine at the finish line, Ebina-san was waving a fresh tree branch back and forth. I wondered if she was trying to cast a charm or something. Could be.

“I pray for theeeee in the name of heavens!” She was even doing the Shinto ritual prayer.

In any case, this girl was really into it. At least as far as the Shinto ritual prayer went. Wow, I felt like an idiot.

Well, having a miko suddenly appear in front of you when your guard is down might be quite terrifying indeed. She was even doing the whole Shinto ritual prayer thing. It was downright eerie.

When I drew closer, Ebina-san noticed me and turned around. “Hi, Hikitani-kun.”

“Hey there. You didn’t have to go all out.”

“I can do onmyouji lines as well[65].”

“That so…”

I wondered what onmyouji lines were supposed to be…. was it like Seimei x Douman or something[66]? This was getting too elaborate so I had no idea anymore. One thing was for certain: the normal Ebina-san was way more frightening than the miko cosplay.

I ran out of fear, leaving behind a casual *see you later* as I sprinted away in full speed.

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When I finished looking around, I returned to the starting point, where two or three groups remained.

Komachi designated a new group, which promptly went on its way. Once they were certain the kids had headed off, Hayama’s group started moving.

“All right, Hikitani-kun. We’ll get going now, so I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Roger that.”

With that rather sparse, businesslike exchange out of the way, I watched Hayama and the other two walk off, and then waited for Rumi’s turn to arrive.

The bonfire crackled, its flames dancing in the wind.

From far away in the middle of the forest, screams – both shrieks and cheers – rang out.

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[65] Onmyouji are practitioners of onmyoudou, a type of traditional Japanese occultism.

[66] This is a reference to the famous omnyouji Abe no Seimei and his rival, Douman. Thanks to teh 1 for the info!

During the wait, I observed how Rumi was doing. In the midst of everyone's merry-making, only Rumi's lips were pursed. From the nearby teacher's point of view, she didn't stick out from her group, and yet as far as the girl herself was concerned, the sense of distance was all too clear; she had been cut off from those around her.

Because Rumi understood that too, she kept one step away from the others. Seeing how far she went to such pains for the sake of others made my chest clench slightly once more.

Komachi drew out the cellphone from her pocket and checked the time. "All right!" she announced crisply. "Next up is this group!"

Of the remaining two groups, one group squealed in delight. The last group sighed in both disappointment and relief.

Urged on by Komachi and Totsuka, the second-last group took their leave.

Once I saw them go, I sneaked away from that place.

My destination was the crossroads at the mountain trail. The coloured cones closed it off, turning it into a chilly one-way road. I hid away in the tree grove so that I wouldn't bump heads with the grade schoolers, pretty much like when I was roaming around before. The night dew dripping off the leaves felt cold to touch. As the night wore on, the outdoor air gradually became chillier as well.

I blitzed past where Yuigahama was situated, slipping right through Yukinoshita's area of control while I was at it. I went all the way to the point dividing the course into two: the mountain path and the winding path around the forest, which led you closer to the small shrine at the finish line.

Since I'd jogged the whole way, I was panting slightly. When I got my breathing under control, I hid my body away in the shadow beneath a nearby tree. This was not to scare any kids but simply to remain unseen.

The second-last group passed through, their raucous voices receding into the distance. Once I was sure they were gone, I shifted the coloured cones. I blocked off the path leading to the shrine and opened up the path that did not progress to the goal.

Hayama, Miura and Tobe were lying in wait on the path leading to the mountain. I went over to them and uttered one thing to them.

"It's time. I'll leave it to you."

"Roger," Hayama answered curtly as he sat down on a nearby rock. Miura and Tobe followed in suit so that they could wait for his orders close by.

Having ascertained that the three of them were on standby, I returned to the crossroads and slipped into the tree's shadow once again.

I waited for Rumi's group to arrive, counting the minutes. One minute. Two minutes. It was about time for them to depart.

As the night deepened, the darkness in the forest seemed to thicken. Gently, I closed my eyes in the darkness and focused on my ears. I could hear the hooting of the owls and the swaying of the branches.

My ears pricked to attention when something made a sound close by.

I could hear the voices of several people. Their sprightly voices drew closer. Rumi's voice was not among them. But when the girls came close enough for me to recognise them by sight, I could definitely make out Rumi's body. Out of everyone in that group, only her mouth was clenched tight.

But that, too, would end tonight.

The group leader pointed at the crossroads. Although she eyed the path blocked by the coloured cones with interest, her feet went straight along the open path. Everyone in the group followed her, not doubting her judgement for a moment.

I erased my presence and followed them from behind, keeping an ample distance.

At that moment, a quiet voice called out my name.

"Hikigaya-kun. What's the situation?"

When I turned around, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were standing next to each other. Since Rumi's group was the last one to go, the girls had already finished their roles as pretend monsters.

"Right now, they're heading towards Hayama and the others. I'm gonna go watch, but what about you guys?"

"I'm going, of course," said Yukinoshita.

"Me too," said Yuigahama.

The two of them nodded. I nodded back at them, and then we started making our move slowly and deliberately.

Rumi's group was talking even louder in an attempt to drive away their fear of the darkness. As they went along, talking merrily non-stop, someone let out a sudden "Ah".

Several people stood before them.

"Oh, it's the high schoolers."

Once they found out it was Hayama's group, the elementary schoolers ran over to them.

"They're wearing super normal clothes!"

"How lame!"

"Put some more effort into it!"

"This test of courage isn't scary at all!"

"They might be high schoolers, but they're so dumb!"

Upon seeing those familiar faces, they probably released all of their pent up nervousness. More vehemently than ever, the elementary schoolers made fun of Hayama's group.

But when those elementary schoolers drew near, Tobe swung around violently.

"Huh?" he snarled in a low, aggressive tone. "Who do you think yer talkin' to?"

"Hey, aren't you guys acting a bit cocky? We ain't your friends, ya know?"

In an instant, the elementary schoolers jerked to a halt.

“Meep…”

In order to understand what was being said to them, they desperately attempted to get their thoughts together. But Miura went on, not even giving them that benefit.

“Come to think of it, someone was totally makin’ a fool outta me just now, huh? Which one of you said it?”

Nobody responded to her question. They just exchanged glances.

Seeing them like that, Miura clicked her tongue in frustration. “I asked which of you said it. Someone did. Who was it? Cat got your tongue? Hurry up and spit it out.”

“I’m so sorry…” someone apologised weakly.

But Miura didn’t give a damn. “What? I can’t hear you” was all she told them.

“You screwin’ with us? Huh? Oi.” Tobe glared at the elementary schoolers, causing them to shrink back a step.

But Miura was already there.

“Do it, Tobe, do it. You know it’s our job to teach these kids manners, right?”

Without any avenue for escape, the elementary schoolers were slowly being driven into a corner. Before they knew it, they were trapped in a triangle of Hayama, Miura and Tobe’s creation.

Tobe was the one threatening violence directly.

Miura was the one driving a wedge into them with each of her piercing words.

And Hayama was the one prompting an inexplicable fear by staring at them coldly in silence.

They’d been in high spirits half a minute ago, so this was a stark difference. They probably wanted to kick themselves for bumbling around so blithely. Playtime was over – one blow took them to rock bottom.

Tobe made a show of cracking his knuckles.

“Hayama-san, may I do these suckers in?” he said, clenching his fists. “Can I beat the snot out of them?”

When Hayama’s name was called, the elementary schoolers all looked at him in unison. *Since he’s the nicest one, won’t he help us out? Surely he’ll smooth things over with that gentle smile of his* – those sorts of dim expectations were bubbling to the surface.

But Hayama lifted the corner of his mouth sardonically and uttered the lines precisely according to our meeting.

“We’ll do it like this. I’ll let half of you run. The other half will stay. You can decide among yourselves who stays,” he said, his voice resounding so coldly it was cruel.

In the midst of a silence where you could hear a pin drop, the elementary schoolers exchanged looks. Wordlessly, with mere glances, they peeped at each other asking what they should do.

“…we’re really, really sorry,” someone said even more meekly than before, almost in tears.

Yet even so, Hayama would not stay his hand. “I don’t want you to apologise. I said half of you will remain here.” He paused. “Now choose.”

Each time his cold words rang out, the children’s shoulders trembled violently.

“Hey, didn’t you hear him? Or maybe you heard him and you’re ignoring him?” Miura needled them.

“Hurry up and leave someone behind. Will it be you? Oi!” Tobe said threateningly as he kicked the ground.

“Tsurumi, you stay behind…”

“…yeah, you should.”

There was silence.

After a whispered discussion, they had decided on a sacrificial lamb. Rumi remained silent, neither speaking up for herself nor saying no. I’d predicted which side of the coin Rumi would end up in, but whoever would be lumped in with her after this was anyone’s guess.

A sudden sigh slipped out of me inadvertently. Up till now, everything had proceeded just as planned. The question now was how far they would dance according to my strings.

Beside me, Yukinoshita sighed as well. “You’re aiming for what happens next.”

“Yeah. We’ll crush the relationships around Tsurumi Rumi.”

Yuigahama, who was listening to our whispered conversation, mumbled something vaguely.

“…I wonder if crushing them is okay.”

“It is,” I said. “If their bonds are unnatural, one hit ought to crush them completely.”

“They’re gonna break?” Yuigahama asked, ill at ease.

I nodded weakly. “Yeah, probably. If those girls really are true friends like Hayama says, that probably won’t happen and that’ll be the end of it. But that’s probably not the case.”

“Indeed. Only like-minded people would gather around someone who would take delight and comfort in tricking someone else,” Yukinoshita said as she peered into the distance. No, she said it as if she was looking into her past.

Sure enough, it didn’t end there, just as Yukinoshita predicted.

When Rumi was pushed out to the front, pain flickered across Hayama’s face for a moment, only for him to instantly replace it with a cold mask.

“So you’ve decided on one person. Now then, two more to go. Hurry up.”

Two more people from a group of five. They might have picked one person, but they still needed two more. Who was wrong and who ought to take the blame? A witch trial ensued.

“…if only Yuka didn’t say that stuff earlier.”

“It’s Yuka’s fault.”

“Yeah…”

Someone suggested a name and the others rolled with it. Someone was there to send her to the guillotine, another to cut the cord, and another to wait in expectation.

Yet no one would so meekly succumb to that fate.

“No way! Hitomi was the first to open her big mouth!”

“I didn’t say anything! I didn’t do anything wrong! Mori-chan was the one with the bad attitude! She’s always like that. She’s like that to the teachers too.”

“Huuh? Me? How does what I act like normally have anything to do with this? Hitomi started it and after that it was Yuka. Why’s it my fault?” she argued heatedly.

It would not have been such a big step for her to grab someone by the collar. Even from just watching a close distance away, the atmosphere was so prickly it made my throat sting.

“Just quit it already. Let’s all apologise…”

At last the tears had started – out of fear and despair, probably not hatred. Or perhaps those tears were intended to draw pity.

But Miura’s attitude remained unchanging even in the face of tears. On the contrary, she made her distaste obvious and slammed shut the cellphone she had been playing with. Her fury flared like a fire. “The one thing I hate the most is girls who think crying will solve everything. Hayato, what are you gonna do? They just repeated themselves.”

“…two more people. Hurry up and choose,” Hayama said mechanically, having stifled his emotions to death.

After that, Tobe pulled off some shadow boxing moves. “Hayato-kun, it’d be quicker to just beat the snot outta all of ‘em.”

“I’ll give them thirty seconds.”

As if he thought that things would never wrap up at this rate, he set a time limit. More firmly than ever, he imposed the shackles known as time onto the girls.

“He won’t let us off even if we apologise… should we call a teacher?”

“Uh-uh, I dunno what’s gonna happen if you tattle. I know your faces.” Tobe easily demolished even that proposal with one utterance.

Lacking any viable option, they stopped saying much. Once they fell silent, only time kept ticking away.

“Twenty seconds left.” Hayama’s voice was the only sound.

After a slight pause, someone in the group let out a lone murmur.

“…it has to be Yuka.”

“Yuka, stay behind.” The voice that joined in was slightly louder.

“…I think that’s a good idea too.” The voice that followed rang calmly.

Someone in the group reacted, most likely Yuka. Her face turned pale. She peered sharply at the face of the one girl who hadn't opened her mouth yet.

The girl receiving Yuka's gaze lowered her eyes and turned her head away.

"…sorry, but we have no choice."

When Yuka heard those words, her mouth trembled. She acted as if she just could not comprehend what had happened.

Beside me, Yuigahama stifled a sigh.

"No choice, huh…"

That's right, no choice.

No one could simply overturn the tide. Thanks to that, even if someone had their misgivings, they wouldn't do anything about it.

You can't overturn popular opinion. There are times when you have no choice but to act against your true feelings.

Because "everyone" said so, "everyone" was doing it, so if you didn't do it too, you wouldn't be one of "everyone" anymore.

But no one person is "everyone". They don't speak and they don't beat you up. They don't get angry and they don't laugh. "Everyone" is an illusion created by the magic of groupthink. It is an apparition born without anyone's knowledge. It is a ghostly spirit created for the sake of shrouding the individual's miniscule evils. Through a monstrous transformation, it would devour anyone outside their circle of friends and even scatter curses on its own friends. Former members would also become obstacles to it.

That's why I despise it.

I despise a world that emphasises "everyone".

I despise the vulgar peace built upon the backs of scapegoats.

I despise the empty ideas created solely through lies, blotting away even kindness and justice, making them out to be mere opportunism, a thorn in your side with the passing of time.

You cannot change the past or the world. You cannot change what has happened, nor can you change "everyone". But like I said before, it's not as if you are obligated to enslave yourself to the system.

You can throw away the past, crush the world under your foot and let it all come to nothing.

"Ten, nine…" Hayama's countdown was still continuing.

Rumi had merely scrunched her eyes shut quietly. She held onto the digital camera hanging from her neck tightly as if it was a protective charm. In her heart, she might have been doing something resembling a prayer.

"Eight, seven…"

The elementary schoolers made angry roars and sobs. The black forest absorbed the girls' hatred and made their darkness look a shade thicker.

It was about the right time. More than enough time had passed for the girls to become aware of themselves and the nasty intentions of those around them. Now all we needed to do was come out in the open and say "You fell for it!" in a cheerful, singsong voice. I could only see a future of blame and censure ahead of me, but I could pull off this much. With that thought running through my mind, I stood up.

"Hold on."

Someone yanked on my shirt, causing my neck to jerk.

I gasped. "What?"

When I looked over my shoulder, Yuigahama was gazing at Rumi solemnly. Having picked up the hint too, I sat down once again.

"Five, four, three…"

"Excuse me…"

When Rumi raised her hand interrupting Hayama's voice, the countdown stopped. *What?* Hayama's gaze fell on Rumi, voicing an unspoken question.

That was when it happened.

A bright flash enveloped the surroundings. *Beep beep beep* - a mechanical sound rang out continuously. The torrent of light flooded the darkness of the night and whitewashed the world as far as the eye could see.

xxxx

"Can you run? This way! Hurry!"

In the midst of a flickering world, I could hear Rumi's voice. Then a bunch of footsteps ran past me. I could tell something had happened, but by then a short amount of time had already passed.

"Just now… was that a flash?" I rubbed my eyes, which had gradually become attuned to the darkness.

Rumi had probably used the digital camera hanging down her neck. It had come so far out of left field it was like being on the receiving end of a stun grenade.

Hayama, Tobe and Miura had completely stopped in their tracks as well.

"Did that girl just save everyone?" Yukinoshita interjected quietly… as if she could not believe it.

"Maybe they really were good friends after all?" Yuigahama asked me, looking a little gladdened.

"There's no way you can really be friends with someone who looks down on you."

"Oh right…" Yuigahama cast her eyes down a little disappointedly.

Still, despite all that, there was something to be said about all this.

"But if she could spare a thought to help them out, even knowing they were phonies, then she must be genuine, I'm sure," I said.

Yukinoshita nodded too as if she did not disagree.

"…I suppose so."

"Nah, not that I really know."

"What the heck? Way to backtrack…" Yuigahama said dejectedly.

What can I say? I really didn't know just yet.

"But y'know, it is nice to have someone genuine," Yuigahama said, smiling.

"There is no such thing as a stereotype bad man in this world. Under normal conditions, everybody is more or less good, or, at least, ordinary. But tempt them, and they may suddenly change. That is what is so frightening about men. One must always be on one's guard."

I recited a string of words that had suddenly come to mind.

"What's all that you're spouting…? Freaky." Yuigahama looked at me with suspicion. What a rude bitch.

Still, Yukinoshita gave a little nod in understanding. "Natsume Sōseki, I see."

"Yeah. Sōseki wrote that, but if you look at it the other way, there is no such thing as a stereotype good man, but tempt them, and they may suddenly change into a good person. I think."

Yuigahama tilted her head slightly when I said all of that. "Hmm? Does that mean you can't tell if someone's genuine or not?"

"Pretty much. The objective truth is an *In a Grove* sort of thing."

"*In a Grove* is by Akutagawa Ryuunosuke…"

As usual, we were caught in the middle of a pointless conversation between two well-known Japanese language experts, but Yukinoshita sighed in disgust and Yuigahama cocked her head in puzzlement. Guess I should've read up on Sōseki properly…

As I was desperately wracking my head for something cool to say about Sōseki's works, Hayama's group came our way.

"You guys did well," Hayama called out to us.

"Yeah. Good job, guys." I thanked Tobe and Miura for putting in the hard yards as well. If those guys hadn't been there, we wouldn't have gotten anything done in the first place, so you could probably say they were the MVPS.

"Man, I ain't doin' that again," said Tobe. "My eyes are still stingin'."

"Hey, can we take a breather for the rest of the day?" asked Miura.

"Can we leave the rest to you? I'm a little worn out too," Hayama sighed, looking very worn out indeed. It probably had to be tiring for a guy to play the bad guy when he was normally so nice to everyone; it didn't suit him.

"Yeah. I'll do what has to be done. Not that it's such a big deal."

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Hayama smiled thinly before returning to his room with Miura and Tobe in tow.

“We should probably get changed as well,” said Yukinoshita.

“Oh, yeah. Today’s been a long day,” said Yuigahama.

“Sure,” I said. “See you later.”

Leaving Yukinoshita and Yuigahama behind, I made my way to the square.

I could see the campfire clearly, blazing brilliantly.

xxxx

As they circled the humungous fire, elementary schoolers sang in chorus. It was one of those songs about being friends forever and that sort of thing. For me, it was a traumatic song instead.

Komachi, Totsuka and Ebina-san had also gone back to change clothes, so I gazed vacantly at the fire alone.

When the song ended, it was time at last for the super exciting, super romantic folk dance. Gazing from outside the circle, it was strange how I could see something wonderful about an event I so loathed.

But each and every one of the girls in Rumi’s group had a long face. Since they’d revealed nothing but their bad sides to each other just a short while ago, it obviously went without saying.

Everyone in the group ignored each other. But from time to time, they sent sideway glances in Rumi’s direction. I wondered if tonight would be the night they started talking to her, little by little.

I had nothing to do in particular, so I searched for Hiratsuka-sensei. When I did, I found her talking and mingling with the elementary school teachers. When I drew closer to her, Hiratsuka-sensei noticed me as well. She cut off the conversation and came over to me.

“Good work on the test of courage. You can take a break for today. I heard there isn’t much work to be done. You’re fine doing it tomorrow. Did you sort out that problem of yours?”

“Y-yeah… er, I wonder about that.”

As I struggled with my answer, Yukinoshita, who had finished changing clothes at some point, came over to us.

“All we did was gang up on the students, make them cry and sow seeds of discord in their friendship.”

“Your explanation makes it sound malicious…”

“But that’s not how it was in actuality.”

“So you say, but that’s, er…”

I couldn’t object. When you put it in plain terms, she was right, and that made me uneasy.

Hiratsuka-sensei tilted her head as if she didn’t know quite how to respond either. “I don’t really get it, but… from what I can see, it’s not isolation. More like standing together… well, whatever. It’s characteristic of you guys.”

Hiratsuka-sensei cracked a smile as she watched the elementary schoolers perform the folk dance. Then she went back to her socialising.

That left Yukinoshita and I together. Yukinoshita called out my name as if she found it a bit difficult to say.

“Hikigaya-kun… was there really someone you wanted to solve this problem for?”

“I did it for Rumi Rumi, I guess,” I answered, shrugging.

I mean, look. It wasn’t like anyone explicitly asked us to do it. I took only one matter upon myself: How can I devise a scheme to bring Tsurumi Rumi peace with her surroundings?

Other than that, I never intended my actions to have anything to do with anything. Even if a certain someone had brought their own baggage along out of their own accord, I wouldn’t make any wild guesses about it. I didn’t think I had achieved anything, either.

“…I see. That’s good to hear.”

With that, Yukinoshita stopped questioning me and turned her eyes towards the campfire in the middle of the square. The folk dance had ended just then and things were breaking up for the night.

On the path just beside us, the students were walking along.

Rumi fell squarely into my line of sight.

She recognised me, and yet she oh, so casually averted her eyes. When she passed me by the side, she absolutely refused to look in my direction.

“No reward for you, I see,” Yukinoshita said jokingly.

“It’s not like I did anything nice for her. Let’s be realistic here. All I did was scare some kids and ruin their friendships. Plus, I used others to do my bidding… it was the worst possible method, so there’s nothing to be grateful over.”

“I suppose so.” Yukinoshita paused. “But it is quite a relief to be rid of your harassers. Besides, that girl moved forward out of the strength of her own will, didn’t she? You might have used illegal moves and planned it poorly, but you’re the one who set the table for her, Hikigaya-kun.”

Yukinoshita laid out the unvarnished truth for me, no holds barred, as straight and true as she ever was.

“And so I think that, even if no one will ever praise you, you’d be forgiven if one good thing came of it.”

For once, Yukinoshita was not looking down on me with her prickly, disagreeable attitude. She was smiling gently at me. But within a moment, her gaze flickered to somewhere behind me. Yukinoshita’s eyes were pointed at Yuigahama and the others.

They held buckets and fireworks in their hands. Komachi and Totsuka caught Hiratsuka-sensei, swiped her lighter and promptly started playing with the fireworks. Hiratsuka-sensei looked more amused than anything.

“Yukinon, sorry to keep you waiting!” Yuigahama said. “Here you go, some fireworks.”

“I’ll sit out of this one, thanks. Do that with someone else. I’ll watch from here.”

“Oh maaaan, after I went all this way to buy some…” Yuigahama grumbled in complaint.

“I don’t have the energy left to indulge in merrymaking,” Yukinoshita soothed Yuigahama. “Be careful handling the fire, all right.”

Having said her piece, Yukinoshita sat down on a bench some distance away.

“Are you a granny or something…?” I asked.

We also borrowed the lighter from Hiratsuka-sensei and lit the candle that had been prepared for setting the fireworks alight.

The firework sticks seemed to have been bought at the convenience store. I split them with Komachi and the others.

When I lit the fire, it made a crackling noise and a green fire erupted. Whoa, how pretty.

…but I wondered if playing with firework sticks was really the correct way of doing it. It seemed kind of different from roasting woodlice. Were you just supposed to watch? If they were rocket fireworks, you could only use your imagination, though. You’d be doing a bombing raid. I’ve read *Zukkoke Sannin-gumi*, you know[67].

“Yukinon! You gotta see this!” Yuigahama cried. She was waving around four sticks in each hand in a flashy sort of way. Was that Balrog-style or what[68]? Please don’t try this at home, kids.

As Yuigahama danced around, traces of light sketched the empty sky with a crackle. Watching Komachi and Totsuka twirl around with buzzing fireworks, I wondered if this was how you were supposed to play with them. Still, they’d go out instantly if you used them in such a flashy way, pretty much as soon as the sparklers made their appearance.

I lit the fire, sheltering it as best I could with my body so that I could protect it from the wind. As I was doing that, Yuigahama sidled up to me and sat down. She slowly lit the fire, hiding it with her body just like I did.

As the stick came alight with a crackle, it released an orange light. She’d been playing around so jubilantly until just a moment ago, and now she was mysteriously quiet.

“…do you think Rumi-chan and the others will be okay?”

“We’re not the ones deciding that.”

“But their weird fads will stop after this.”

“And instead, they lost their friends,” I said as the remains of the fire slipped off my stick. The vivid orange light, resembling melted iron, fell to the ground and rapidly lost its spark.

Yuigahama gave me the next sparkler and told me to help myself.

[67] A series of novels aimed at children.

[68] A character from *Street Fighter*.

"…still, things cleared up, you know? Letting it out in the open does wonders for you. I've been turning a new leaf like crazy, so take my word for it."

Source: Gahama-san, I guess? That had some persuasion power. In that case, maybe I could allow myself to believe her.

I brought the sparkler I'd been playing with in my hand closer to the candle. Thin smoke rose with a hiss and the fireworks flew around in the shape of a globe.

The sparkler Yuigahama was holding went out with a muffled hiss. As if Yuigahama had been waiting for that to happen, she whispered something softly.

"Hey, Hikki. You did everything, you know."

"What?"

"The stuff we were talking about the other day. We didn't have a barbeque, but we did make curry, and even if we didn't go to the pool, we did swim in the water. We didn't camp out for fun but we did have a training camp. And we did the test of courage and the spooking-people-out part."

"Would you really count all that?"

I got the feeling it was all way different. But Yuigahama simply chucked out the extinguished sparkler and brought out a new one.

"They're pretty much the same, so yeah!" She paused. "Plus, we're watching fireworks together."

"Well, there's that."

"Everything came true. So that means… you have to make the part where we hang out together true as well."

Lost for words, I gazed at Yuigahama as if I was being pulled towards her. When our eyes met, Yuigahama laughed. The fireworks came alight.

Even though she had said that to me, my answer was decided.

"…one of these days, I guess."

xxxx

By the time we cleaned up the fireworks afterwards, it had gotten late. We had finished things up yesterday at around the same time.

Just like yesterday, I took a bath in the administration building and then followed the road to the bungalow, all while being subjected to the nighttime wind. Since tonight was my final night, I could take my time in the bath.

Reaching the bungalow, I found the lights were already out. Everyone appeared to be asleep.

When I got in the futon in the corner of the room, which Totsuka had probably laid out for me, a deep sigh slipped out of me.

…please be my bride.

“Hikitani-kun…”

“Hayama, huh. Did I wake you?”

“Nah, I was having trouble sleeping, that’s all.”

Well, there was probably no way anyone could sleep easy after being made to do what he did today. I’d only watched from the shadows and I didn’t feel too good about it. “Sorry I pushed the villain role on you.”

“I don’t mind, really. I don’t feel *that* hung up about it. It just brought back some memories… a long time ago, I did nothing when a similar scene played out in front of me,” Hayama said, not jokingly or dejectedly, but with something like yearning.

Knowing nothing of Hayama and Yukinoshita’s past, I had no idea how I was supposed to answer that. Instead of make some generic response, all I could do was simply pretend to be asleep.

“Things would probably have turned out better if Yukinoshita-san had been like her sister.”

Ah, so this guy knew about Haruno as well, probably from meeting her at home or whatever. But even if we knew the same person, I had to disagree with Hayama.

“Nah… you don’t have to say that. Just imagining Yukinoshita with good social graces creeps me out.”

“Haha, guess you’re right.”

It was dark so I couldn’t see him, but it was hard to imagine Hayama’s smile from the way he spoke. His tone suddenly dropped, and I could hear him breathing slightly.

“…hey, I wonder how things would’ve turned out if we went to the same elementary school, Hikitani-kun.”

I answered his question promptly. “It’s obvious. There would’ve just been one more loner in your school.”

“You think so?”

“I think so.” My voice was extremely thick with confidence.

I could somewhat make out the sound of Hayama’s quiet chuckling. In order to distract me from the fact he had been laughing, Hayama let out a little cough.

“I think a lot of things would’ve been ended up differently. It’s just… even so…”

There was a pause as if he was choosing his words.

“I probably wouldn’t have gotten along with you, Hikigaya-kun.”

Silence. For a moment after those unexpected words, my mind went blank. I wondered how Hayama, who could get along with just about anyone, could say something like that to me. I paused for a short while, and then I put on a reproachful voice.

“…screw you. That came as kind of a shock just now.”

“That was a joke. G’night.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

That might have been the first time I recognised Hayama Hayato as a real human being. And Hayama had recognised Hikigaya Hachiman in just the same way.

The sound of his voice was not just kind. Something harsh and severe was hidden somewhere.

My intuition told me that he had not spoken any lies – not a single one.

Chapter 8: And Then the Car Yukinoshita Yukino Was in Drives Away

It was quiet inside the car on the way home.

The rear seat was completely destroyed. Thirty minutes hadn't even passed and we had fallen into a commonplace state of affairs for car trips – namely, everyone had started dozing off. I was in the passenger seat, and like the others, my mind wandered and I started nodding off. Still, I'd feel bad for Hiratsuka-sensei if I fell asleep next to her, so I did my best to stay awake.

The highway was empty. We students were on holiday, so we couldn't appreciate it properly, but for the rest of the world it was a weekday. It still wasn't time for the Obon Festival, so nothing blocked the roads to Chiba in particular.

I'd probably have to put up with this for two or three hours until we arrived.

"I'm planning to let you all go at school, okay? Taking each of you home would be a bit of a pain, I'd expect."

I wondered if Hiratsuka-sensei had worked out the exact route home. That's how I heard it. "You don't have to do all that," I answered, nodding.

Hiratsuka-sensei also had to be tired, so I got the feeling she was better off letting us go as soon as possible.

As Hiratsuka-sensei looked straight ahead, she spoke up gently. "You… walked a tightrope this time. If you'd put one foot wrong, this might have blown up into a problem."

I couldn't recall discussing the matter with her, but it seemed she'd heard of it from somewhere. She was alluding to the matter with Tsurumi Rumi.

I sighed. "Sorry."

"I'm not blaming you for it or anything. You probably did what you had to do. In fact, I think you did well given the lack of time."

"I used the worst methods, though."

"Yeah, you did. You're the worst."

"Why are you criticising my personality…? We were talking about my methods."

"You'd have to be the worst to think of those methods on that occasion. Yet maybe because you're the lowest of the low, you can get close to people who have hit rock bottom. It's a valuable kind of disposition to have."

"What an unpleasant way of praising someone…"

I was weary beyond measure.

But Hiratsuka-sensei, on the other, hummed something cheerfully. “Noooow then, I wonder who the point goes to this time.”

“It has to be a big win for Hachiman.”

I did the conceptual planning and the producing this time, after all. Er, well, when it came to the results and whether we actually accomplished any good, that was an extremely delicate matter, but it made sense when you took my intentions and attitude into account.

Hiratsuka-sensei snorted. “But if Yukinoshita didn’t hear you out and make a decision, you probably wouldn’t have done anything. Plus, if Yuigahama didn’t convince you, you wouldn’t have found a reason to do anything in the first place.”

“Damn, so we’re all number one…”

And I was so close. Or so I thought, when she flashed me a toothy grin.

“Since when were you deluded about being number one?”

“Not this again…”

“You’ve probably been a pain in the arse since day one. I’m deducting marks for that. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama have one point each and you have zero.”

“Somehow, I expected that…”

“Anyway, you did well this time.”

A hand reached up suddenly from the driver’s seat. With one hand operating the steering wheel, Hiratsuka-sensei patted my head and stroked it.

“It’s embarrassing being treated like a kid, so please quit it,” I said.

“Aww, don’t be shy.” Hiratsuka-sensei insisted on stroking my head, as if she found teasing me to be a fun sport.

“Ah, I’m not talking about me. I mean it’s embarrassing for Sensei. Seriously, how old must you be to treat a high school student as a k-”

“Hikigaya. You’d better sleep.” Her hand flew to my neck like a sword.

“Meep.”

And just like that, I found myself facing a dark tunnel outside of consciousness.

xxxx

Someone shook my body roughly.

“Hikigaya. We’re here, so wake up.”

“Mm…”

When I opened my eyelids, a familiar scene was laid out before me. It was the school I went to every day.

The time was just past noon.

I must have been really worn out, because I'd been snoozing like a baby. Who knows how long I slept? When I woke up I was totally refreshed.

"Sorry, looks like I fell asleep at some point."

"Hm?" Then she said, "Oh, right. Don't worry about it. You were probably worn out. Now then, time to get out."

Urged on by an unusually gentle Hiratsuka-sensei, I went outside. The sweltering midsummer heat coiled around my skin. This sort of air wasn't so unusual when you were close to the sea. Only two or three days had passed and yet it was supremely nostalgic.

Out on the road, each and every one of us stretched and let slip a yawn.

We unloaded the baggage from the minivan and drowsily prepared to go home. The boiling heat radiating off the asphalt did not help with the drowsiness.

Once everyone had checked to make sure nothing was lost, we shuffled into a line. Hiratsuka-sensei gazed at us with satisfaction.

"You guys all did well. The training camp lasts until you reach home. Be careful on your way back. All right, you're dismissed."

She had a smug look on her face for some reason. My guess was that she probably had these lines all worked out before we had even departed…

Adjusting the bag slung over her back, Komachi looked up at me. "Onii-chan, how are we gonna get home?"

"Guess we'll take the bus on the Tokyo-Chiba line. Let's get some shopping done on the way home."

"Aye aye, sir!" she answered cheerfully with a crisp salute. "If we're taking the Tokyo-Chiba line, won't Yukino-san come home with us too?"

"Indeed… then I'll accompany you halfway." Yukinoshita nodded firmly.

Yuigahama and Totsuka exchanged glances. "Oh, sure. See you later." It was around time for the two of them to utter farewell greetings as they headed down the path.

With a low, quiet hum as if it were driving along incognito at a leisurely pace, the side of a black hired car appeared before of us.

A middle-aged man sat in the driver's seat by the left driving wheel. I peered at him, from his regulation cap to his silver-grey hair. The back seat window was tinted, so I couldn't peep in from outside.

"Looks like a rich person's car…" I remarked.

There was this sparkling gold flying fish-like thing stuck on the car's vanguard. The bonnet had been polished without a single stain. Somehow, I felt like I'd seen it before…

As I was peering closely at the car, the dandy driver got out of the car, bowed to us courteously and opened the back seat door with a well-rehearsed movement.

Out came a lady who gave off a comfortable sort of feeling like mild autumn weather, even though it was the middle of summer.

“Hiiii, Yukino-chan!”

Yukinoshita Haruno, swathed in a pure white dress, stepped out of the car gracefully.

“Nee-san…”

“Huh, is that… Yukinon’s sister?” Yuigahama blinked vigorously and looked back and forth between Yukinoshita and Haruno-san.

“Whoa, they look alike…” Komachi muttered. Totsuka nodded fervently along with her. The two of them were similar despite being polar opposites, just like Nega and Posi[69].

“Yukino-chan, you said you were gonna come home over the summer vacation but you never came back at all. Your big sis was so worried and came to pick you up!”

“How did she know we were here…?” I asked. “That’s seriously freaky.”

“I suppose she tailed me on her cell phone’s GPS. She always does things the absolute worst way possible.”

As I was talking quietly with Yukinoshita, Haruno-san interjected. “Ah, it’s Hikigaya-kun! Wow, so you really were hanging out together. Hmm? It’s a date, right? It’s totally a date! I’m sooo jealous! Oh to be young!”

“Not again… didn’t I tell you that you were mistaken?”

She elbowed me incessantly – she was the biggest pain in the arse, I swear. Far from deterring her, my open scowl made her escalate her ribbing until our bodies were entirely glued together. She was irritating and soft and she smelled nice and honestly, she was a pain in the crotch.

“E-excuse me! You’re making Hikki uncomfortable!” Yuigahama pulled on my arm, yanking me away from Haruno-san.

As if on cue, Haruno-san jerked to a halt. Haruno-san stared hard at Yuigahama in puzzlement. But I didn’t miss the sharpness in her gaze for that split second.

With a serene smile on her lips, Haruno-san turned back to Yuigahama. “Er, uh… a new character, huh? Are you… Hikigaya-kun’s girlfriend?”

“N-not at all! We’re not like that!”

“Gee, that’s a relief. I was wondering what to do if you were getting in Yukino-chan’s way. I’m Yukinoshita Haruno, Yukino-chan’s older sister.”

“Ah, pleased to make your acquaintance… I’m Yukinon’s friend Yuigahama Yui.”

“Friends, huh…” Contrary to her grinning expression, only her voice was unpleasantly cold. “Oh right, even Yukino-chan has friends. How nice, what a relief.”

Her words and tone might have been gentle, but there was something prickly about the atmosphere.

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[69] Nega and Posi are the two animal familiars in the anime *Creamy Mami, The Magic Angel.* The names Nega and Posi are short for ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ respectively.

“Oh, but you mustn’t lay a hand on Hikigaya-kun. He belongs to Yukino-chan.”

“Wrong,” Yukinoshita and I blurted out almost in unison.

“See what I mean! They’re in synch.” Haruno-san giggled in amusement.

Was teasing us her way of having fun, or was even that a play she put on for us?

“Haruno, that’s enough,” someone called out.

Haruno-san’s smile froze. “Long time no see, Shizuka-chan.”

“Stop calling me by that name.” Hiratsuka-sensei turned away with a *hmph* as if she was embarrassed.

Surprised that the two of them were acquainted, I shot Hiratsuka-sensei a question. “Sensei, you know her?”

“I taught her a long time ago.”

“Does that mean-?” I was about to ask directly about the real meaning of Hiratsuka-sensei’s answer, only for Haruno-san to interrupt me.

“Well, we can catch up some other time, right, Shizuka-chan? Right then, Yukino-chan. Time for us to get going, huh?”

So she said, but Yukinoshita showed no inclination of moving. She pretty much ignored her completely.

“Come on, mother’s waiting.”

Yukinoshita, whose defiant attitude had been unshakeable until now, flinched in reaction.

She hesitated slightly. But then she sighed resignedly and turned to Komachi and me.

“Komachi-san, I’ll have to disappoint you even though you went out of your way to invite me. I am unable to go with you.”

“What? Oh, okay… well, if you’ve got family stuff…” Komachi answered uncertainly, bewildered by how distant Yukinoshita sounded through her formal choice of words.

Yukinoshita smiled thinly and uttered quiet parting words, her voice dwindling away.

“…goodbye.”

Pushed along by Haruno-san, Yukinoshita disappeared into the car.

“See ya, Hikigaya-kun. Bye bye!” Haruno-san waved eagerly before getting into the car. “Onward to the city building,” she told the driver.

The driver then performed a smooth bow and quietly closed the door. He slipped into the driver’s seat, indifferent to us. Somehow, it seemed his bow at the beginning had not been directed towards us but at Yukinoshita.

There was no way of peering inside the tinted windows. And yet I was sure that Yukinoshita was sitting up straight, only her eyes fixed elsewhere.

The engine started quietly and the hired car drove off smoothly. It continued in a straight line before disappearing around the corner.

In a daze, we watched the car go off. Yuigahama pulled on my sleeve.

“Hey… you know that car…”

“Well, hired cars pretty much look the same. I was just thinking about the pain at the time, so it’s not like I remember all the trivial details.”

I said something I didn’t really mean.

In truth, I realised it the moment I laid eyes on that hired car.

–

That summer vacation, Yukinoshita Yukino and I did not meet again.

Afterword

Hello, this is Watari Wataru.

As I write a story about deep summer during the throngs of deep winter, keenly feeling the karmic fate of a light novel author, I wonder how all of you are doing on this fine day. I'm doing well myself, thank you.

The reason I write this is because this volume will finally hit the stores in summer.

When you think of summer, it's a season sparkling with youth: skimpy clothes, swimsuits and see-through bras! I just realised something as soon as I wrote that… come to think of it, my mother will be reading this book.

Anyway, let's talk about summer stories. When it comes to a teen romcom, summer is so essential you'd be waiting in the summer for it[70].

As for me, who could never stand summer and hated it more than anything, it was a harsh and painful chapter in my life.

It was so bad that it wasn't unusual for people to call me a sakimori or something because I insisted on defending a corner of my house as part of the Japan Home-Defense Force[71]. I certainly wanted to add "Guardian of the Home" to the *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* series[72]. That was how much I couldn't stand summer.

Also, those "beach day" things are pretty much discriminatory, you know? Since there *are* guys who won't go to the beach in summer, we ought to take that into account and make "House Day" a national holiday, you know? Come to think of it, I just want more holidays.

Society might call it summer vacation, but as far as working adults are concerned, it's not really a summer vacation, you know? When you start working, your summer vacation is a measly three days or so. Isn't that just the Bon Festival?! I demand an apology to the me that was all happy and like: "It's summer vacation! I can take lots of breaks! Yay for summer vacation! Wataru loves summer vacation!"

And with that, I present *Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come wa Machigatteiru* Volume 4. Please look forward to the rest of Hikigaya Hachiman's summer vacation, which still isn't over for a while yet!

Below are the acknowledgments, or as they say in English: *special thanks.* In German, it's… *danke schön,* I think.

To Ponkan8-sama: I wrote volume 4 solely because I wanted to see the swimsuits you draw. You worked hard on the illustrations too. Thank you ever so much. On another note, swimsuits are too OP!!

To my manager Hoshino-sama: I am in awe of how well you handled the Drama CD and illustrations, turning into reality the plans we discussed amid idle chatter. Are you Shenron or something[73]? Thank you ever so much.

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[70] 'Waiting in the summer' is the English translation of the title *Ano Natsu de Matteru*, a teen romcom anime.

[71] Sakimori is a term for soldiers garrisoned at strategic posts in Kyushu in ancient times. The Japan Home-Defense Force is a pun on the Japan Self-Defense Force.

[72] Otherwise known as *Seirei no Moribito.*

[73] Shenron is the magical dragon in the *Dragon Ball* series. He can grant wishes.

To Inoue Kenji-sama[74]: Although we are not acquainted, thank you for writing the comments on this book's jacket. When I was dog tired slogging through deadline after deadline, your words gave me quite a lot of encouragement.

To all the authors: Thank you for manufacturing an alibi and covering up for me when I was drinking alcohol while neck deep in deadlines. I look forward to doing it all over again next time.

Finally, to all my readers: It seems I can live to work another day thanks to your support. There may be some tough points, but I really do love this job. Thank you ever so much – I mean it. I hope you treat me this well next time.

And with that, I lay down my pen for now.

A certain day in February, from a certain place in Chiba Prefecture, while sipping on waaaaarm MAX Coffee,

Watari Wataru

[74] The author of *Baka and Test.*